



UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

**AN EXPLORATION OF INFANT TEACHER UNDERSTANDINGS OF
PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY WITHIN THE IRISH CONTEXT**

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ABSTRACT

TITLE: AN EXPLORATION OF INFANT TEACHER UNDERSTANDINGS OF PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY WITHIN THE IRISH CONTEXT

Over the last decade Ireland has seen growing interest in the play-based pedagogy known as Aistear (2009) in the infant classroom. The purpose of this study was therefore an exploration on play-based pedagogy understandings in infant classrooms in the primary school sector, with a focus on teacher understandings within the Irish context. The works of George Herbert Mead and Urie Bronfenbrenner comprised the theoretical frame of reference and a qualitative design used, which included the data sources of individual interviews, two-phase classroom observations, and pre- and post-focus groups. Building on the initial findings, training sessions were put in place as continuous professional development (CPD). The data were analysed via content analysis and a constant comparison approach. The findings demonstrated that teachers constructed a concept of 'play' in the infant classroom which emphasised the instrumental significance of play rather than the intrinsic significance of play. While there was a generally constructive understanding of Aistear, all the teachers referred to the many barriers to inclusively incorporating Aistear into the infant classroom. Indeed it transpired that all the teacher participants considered a formal didactic attitude essential for certain aspects of teaching. Moreover, since they concurred that individual understandings of play-based learning necessarily determines classroom teaching techniques, it is evident that more training, assistance and resources should be provided by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in order to guarantee the consistent integration of Aistear pedagogical practice throughout Irish infant classrooms to maximise impact on children's play. Teachers also maintained that the degree of Aistear support within their school environment further determined the efficacy of the infant play-based pedagogy.

DECLARATION

I, Linda M. Davern, declare that this dissertation, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: _____

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Date: _____

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BTHA	British Toy and Hobby Association
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DAP	Developmental Appropriate Practice
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EHS	Education and Health Science
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NAECS/SDE	National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDST	Professional Development Services for Teachers
PHD	Doctor of Philosophy
PPCT	Process-Person-Context-Time
PSC	Primary School Curriculum
SESE	Social, Environmental and Scientific Education
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VCAA	Victoria Curriculum and Association Authority

**I tried to teach my child from books,
He gave me only puzzled looks
I tried to teach my child with words
They passed him by often unheard
Despairingly, I turned aside
‘How shall I teach this child!’ I cried
Then suddenly he turned to me
And in my hand he placed a key
‘Come’ he said, ‘and play with me’
(Anonymous)**

**THIS THESIS IS DEDICATED TO MY MOTHER, KITTY, WHO SADLY PASSED AWAY
UNEXPECTEDLY BEFORE I HAD COMPLETED MY PhD.**

LOVE YOU, MAM X

CHAPTER ONE

Beginning of the Journey

“We don’t stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing”

George Bernard Shaw

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study is an exploration of infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy within the Irish context. In virtually all stages of life, from technology to education, it is clear that modernisation is ever increasing in today’s world. Since it is not so long ago that a lone teacher in a one-room school educated children of every age, the enormous advances to date in the Irish education system are plain to see. Play is identified as an essential element for children’s learning (Saracho, 2012). Throughout history, from Aristotle to Montessori, leading educationalists have maintained the overarching theme of play as a fundamental solution to the development of children. However, since concepts of play have not been fully realised within the classroom setting and children’s natural disposition to inquisitiveness and imagination is being suppressed in the modern world (Elkind, 2007), there is an arguable need to revisit the basic development and learning significance of play. A review of the relevant literature confirmed scant research into infant teachers’ understanding towards play-based pedagogy in infant classrooms in the Irish context.

For the purposes of this study, the theoretical foundations essential to fully apprehending the progression of play as a significant component of early childhood education are on the work of Mead (1934) and Bronfenbrenner (1979). Mead’s (1934) concept of symbolic interactionism emphasises an idiographic formulation of development which explores how humans interact with the socio-cultural world. For symbolic interactionists, the world is not merely “out there” in anticipation of scientific study but is rather “socially and symbolically constructed” (Sherman and Webb, 1988, p.124) and given meaning by the existence of symbols, such as, for instance, language. As such, it privileges subjective meanings against the backdrop of the social context in which they take place. Flick (1998) claims the axiomatic methodological tenet of symbolic interactionism is the researcher, “has

to see the world from the angle of the subjects he or she studies” (p.18). Such a viewpoint acknowledges “that multiple realities exist that are inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own vantage points” (Hatch, 2002, p.15). In light of this, the present study elicits the viewpoints of four infant teachers and recognises that while individual understandings of play-based pedagogy may diverse, each view is equally valid. In infant classrooms, teachers endeavour to understand and support children’s developing sense of self. In *Mind, Self, and Society* George Herbert Mead (1934) delineated the relationship of play to the development of a stable sense of self. For Mead, play is the main vehicle for young children to learn to differentiate their own viewpoints from those of others in their social worlds. As children engage in the pretence of being others and synchronise those roles with the roles engaged by their playmates, they come to view their own behaviour from an external perspective. According to Mead, the primary years provide the momentum and context for children to view themselves as inimitable human beings within the community of others. Mead further purports that the young child operates in the play stage of the development of the self: the stage at which a child can achieve uncomplicated role transformations from self to others. Smilansky (1968) posited this as the initial stage of role-play, wherein, in Mead’s terms, the child is just beginning to differentiate the “I,” or impulsive characteristic of the self, from the “me,” or the sense of the self as a social object. This is the stage during which children often create imaginary companions which inheres the external companion’s perspective as well as that of the self. Moreover this stage is also characterised by the formulation of a rudimentary sense of self which includes children’s subjective viewpoints in addition to representations of how others view them. As role-playing becomes more complex, children enter into what Mead called the “game stage” of the development of the self. At this point, learns to coordinate his/her representation of himself/herself with the various perspectives that others could take. The child can consider the diverse features of his/her “pretend selves” compared with the other players is able to move fluidly between the “I” and the “me”, and deems himself/herself a social object in addition to an actor in his/her play.

The third stage of the self as theorised by Mead is that of the generalized other. During this stage the child not only coordinates the “I” of the self with multiple “me’s” but also adopts a metacognitive viewpoint of the framework within which action takes place. This stage is epitomised by an interest games with formal rules as children coordinate the viewpoints of players with their understanding of the framework which presides over the

strict structure of the game. Indeed, Mead stressed the significance of the social context in which children learn a game. This behaviour mirrors children's growing awareness of socio-cultural rules, as expressed in both their role behaviour contained by the play and in their discussions about roles outside the play. This stage of development takes some time and teachers have observed the pleasure children take in creating their own games or inventing their own rules. This theoretical framework was deemed a good fit for the proposed study in that its fundamental purpose is to investigate meanings created by social interaction.

Stemming from the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), the social ecological system model of child development places the child at the centre of a complex interrelated ecosystem and seeks to understand the concomitant influences on children's learning and development. Moreover, it provides a coherent understanding of the complex environment in which every individual is situated. Just as Bronfenbrenner proposed that the child is influenced by four ecological systems, so too is the teacher. As such social constructivist theory was utilised as the theoretical framework for this research study. Its proponents assert that individual understandings of reality shape human thoughts and behaviours (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and that the structure of meaning is a process "forged in the crucible of everyday interaction. Meanings are negotiated, exchanged and modified through everyday interactions with others" (Rosenholtz, 1989, p.3). In short, social constructivist theory maintains that people shape their own understanding and knowledge of the world from direct experiences and subsequent reflection. In addition, "substantial evidence has identified that through play, children demonstrate improved verbal communication, high levels of social and interaction skills, creative use of play materials, imaginative and divergent thinking skills, and problem solving capabilities" (Wood, 2004, p.21).

Play has been accredited in countless government documents as an efficient, developmentally appropriate method for early childhood education (ECE) in Ireland (DES, 2011, NCCA, 2009). In recent years, numerous Irish policies documents and reports have been published in Ireland which underscore the significance of the development of early childhood education in Ireland in recent years. The 2009 launch of Aistear, the early learning curriculum framework, rolled-out implementation guidelines for early childhood teachers for children in this category, while the mandatory implementation of the primary school Aistear, literacy and numeracy strategy for learning and life was unveiled in 2011 (DES, 2011). This strategy breaks new ground for the implementation and improvement of literacy and

numeracy in Ireland. Within the key effective methodologies outlined to assist teachers in achieving successful educative outcomes for all, learning through play features as a developmentally appropriate teaching and learning methodology for infant classes. Employing both the literacy and numeracy strategy and the Aistear curriculum framework then, the ECE has compiled a range enlightening discourse which work to direct teacher understandings of effective teaching and learning in classrooms.

This research was *an exploration of infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy within the Irish context*. Owing to the 2009 introduction of Aistear, the subject of play has never been riper for exploration and discussion. Research confirms that the manner in which teachers speak during teacher-child play interactions directly influences the characteristics of play, children's development, and their ultimate learning experiences (Harper and McCluskey, 2003). This suggests that additional explorations of teacher-child interactions during play is necessary as a number of such studies revealed inappropriate teacher interventions during play, which in turn negatively influenced children's learning (Rogers and Evans, 2008).

1.1 RATIONALE FOR RESEARCHING INFANT TEACHER UNDERSTANDINGS

At time of writing, debates into which aspects most influence teaching performance are ongoing. It has been suggested that understandings are closely related to teacher approaches for dealing with barriers in their everyday professional life, their own well-being, how they reform the student learning environment, and how they inspire student motivation and accomplishment. To reiterate; research suggests that teacher behaviour in the classroom is inspired and shaped by their understandings (ibid, 2008). Previous studies have also concluded that such understandings directly influence their communication with children, and as such, have the potential to significantly impact both classroom ambience and student outcomes.

Infant teachers are particularly mindful of the centrality of play to children's development. However, they are less aware of the actual extent to which play can assist education and social learning and of their own roles in the children's play dyad. While teachers consider play an essential element of their curriculum then, they often prepare less

than adequately; trusting their instincts rather than ringfencing specific aims and objectives for play (Bodrova and Leong, 2004).

As there is a direct correlation between teacher understandings and teacher practices, it is imperative to establish infant teachers' priorities for children before entering an infant class. Furthermore, the literature suggests that teacher understandings are more developmentally advanced than their classroom practices. In fact, while studies have accrued a strong evidence base in support of play-based pedagogies, individual teacher understandings often play a fundamental role in determining their choice of pedagogical practices (Pajares, 1992). Other research studies have suggested that play enables teachers to serve as links between children and their surrounding world. Through play interactions, teachers can validate and challenge children's senses and their thoughts, thereby allowing children to focus on awareness, interactions, and intentions (Samuelsson and Johansson, 2006). Overall, play involves different kinds of teacher interactions with children; teachers are therefore placed to decide on the degree of involvement in children's activities. To this end, teachers must observe what children are doing, support their efforts, and become more thoughtfully involved, to support additional learning.

Evidence supports that a teacher's individual understanding shapes his/her judgments more organically than abstract conceptualisations of child development and learning (Spodek, 1987). Thus, infant teachers who have staunch convictions in basic-skill practices, (i.e., highly structured teacher-directed education) are less inclined to support child-centered practices; while infant teachers who support a child-centered curriculum, promote child autonomy and self-respect (Stipek and Byler, 1997). Studies confirm that infant teachers generally adhere to belief systems and approaches which align with the developmentally appropriate practices that satisfy the cognitive and age requirements of children (Vartuli, 1999; Buchanan, Burts, Bidner, White and Charlesworth, 1998; Stipek and Byler, 1997). This may be an indication of the positive appeal of child-centered practices and the residual effects of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) across numerous early childhood training programs (Vartuli, 1999).

Philosophers such as Dewey, Froebel, Montessori, Plato, and others, have hypothesised that education be supported through active involvement of children through play.

Their insights continue to be rehearsed and applied in contemporary classrooms and continue to impact the professional stance of numerous infant teachers. Dewey believed school should give children real life experiences which would incorporate content and increase in difficulty. Yet despite all that has been written about the positive functions of play, it has not attained a prominent position in the discourse of the early child development. On the contrary, the importance of play for cognitive and development growth has been greatly diminished, and even entirely removed from several early childhood settings in certain situations (Miller and Almon, 2009; Fromberg, 2006). While play-based pedagogy policy documents direct all Irish infant teachers' in their delivery of their lessons, the value of play in terms of children's learning and development may be construed and understood quite differently by individual teachers. As such, Badzis and colleagues (2003) contend that play hovers in an unstable position in early childhood care and education (ECCE). They further claim that in some infant classes, play tends to be restricted in length and frequency, and indeed, in a number of settings, play-time was allotted approximately thirty minutes or less and replaced with a predetermined official curriculum (Miller and Almon, 2009). It is clear that guaranteeing quality play continues to be a considerable challenge in many diverse educational environments (Rogers and Evans, 2008; Wood and Bennett, 2001).

Questions have been raised concerning teacher-child interactions in the context of teachers' roles through play. Such interactions are perceived as intrinsic to the realisation of the learning potential of play as teacher-child interactions further reflect teacher understandings and perspectives on children's learning (Pramling-Samuelsson and Sheridan, 2009; Jingbo and Ericker, 2005). Furthermore, while the critical role of the relationship between the child and teacher is fundamental to high-quality teaching in the primary years and is key to children's achievement (Hattie, 2012), the implementation of a play-based pedagogy in infant classes continues to present a struggle for certain teachers.

Curriculum development and restructuring knowledge of previous practice has a great deal to propose concerning curriculum development and implementation in present-day thinking. In an age where curriculum is considered a social structure, more confidence should be placed on teachers' professional ability and judgment to structure and deliver productive educational events and optimum learning outcomes for children. Development implies growth; growth brings change; and constructive infers transformation.

High-quality continuous professional development (CPD) can enhance teaching competency and exert a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning for young children in the classroom. Hargreaves (2003) holds that “professional development involves more than learning knowledge and skills....[it is] a personal path toward greater professional integrity and human growth” (pp.62-63). Despite extensive extant research on play, little has been undertaken on teacher understandings in the context of play-based pedagogy in infant classes. This is particularly true in Ireland (Walsh *et al.*, 2011).

1.2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Given this brief review of the relevant literature, a primary objective of this research was *an exploration of infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy within the Irish context*. Whilst the primary aim was to explore infant teacher understandings, it was also deemed important to examine subsequent embedded research questions which needed further investigation.

- What were infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy?
- What was the role of the infant teachers during Aistear?
- What potential barriers transpired when implementing Aistear?
- How could Aistear be used as an instrument to integrate with the PSC?

1.3 OUTLINE AND STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

This research study brought together the understandings of four infant teachers, with the aim of generating findings to answer the research question. The underpinning literature on teacher understandings and play in infant classrooms were obtained from various sources, particularly library and online journal databases, and duly reviewed. Data were collected from individual interviews and classroom observations during phase 1 (March 2014 to April 2014). Building on these findings, pre-focus and post-focus group sessions, the training sessions and classroom observations of phase 2 took place (October 2015 to December 2015). As the introduction of Aistear was found to result in higher quality standards in the field of ECCE, eliciting infant teacher understandings on play-based pedagogy is essential to appreciate how this pedagogy is being applied in practice.

The present study consists of six chapters as follows:

Chapter One provides a brief background to the research study in addition to the rationale for researching infant teachers' understandings on play-based pedagogy.

Chapter Two presents the literature review and delineates the core theoretical frameworks.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological issues of the contemporary research study.

Chapter Four presents the overall research findings in line with the key themes that emerged from the analysis of the data.

Chapter Five discusses the research findings relative to the literature reviewed and the stated purpose of the study.

Chapter Six offers a summary of the key themes which were developed, a number of recommendations for further research, along with implications for future scholarship.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Do not keep children to their studies by compulsion but by play”

Plato

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this research study was *an exploration of infant teacher understandings of play based-pedagogy within the Irish context*. This chapter therefore opens with a discussion of play and its integration into infant education. Following this contextualisation, the history of Irish primary education is presented, and the early childhood education of other countries be compared and contrasted to the structure currently in place in Ireland. Aistear (2009), the curriculum framework used by infant teachers is then examined, as is the developmentally appropriate methodology of play. The discussion once again centres the significance of play for early childhood education and elucidates the many advantages this approach can afford to infant teachers. Finally, the role of the infant teacher in terms of the implementation and participation of play will be explored using pertinent literature.

2.1 SEARCH AND REVIEW

The literature analysed and discussed in this chapter has been drawn from a wide range of key sources, mainly comprising of library and online journals. These sources provided invaluable data on the exercise of play in early childhood education. Following an examination, they were analysed and coded using key words and search terms which included:

- Play-based pedagogy
- Theories of play
- History of infant education in Ireland
- Play as a teaching methodology
- Aistear and the PSC integration

- Role of the infant teacher
- Teacher change
- Teacher understandings towards play

Subsequent to the selection of texts, thematic analysis was undertaken and each document was reviewed and coded. All comparable literature was clustered and thematically categorised and each theme allocated a strand for comparison with additional literature. Based on the themes and strands identified, the emergent research questions shaped the research trajectory of the *exploration of infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy within the Irish context*.

2.2 ROLE OF PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY

Play comes in many shapes and forms. As a result any all-inclusive definition of play is considerably multifaceted. The features of play explained here cohere with those highlighted in the Aistear guidelines (NCCA, 2009) wherein can be understood as the complete behaviour of a child, including a range of activities; some of which advance learning, and others which do not (Hutt cited in Wood and Attfield, 2005).



Figure 1: Aistear Framework

The framework is set out under four themes: namely, well-being, identity and belonging; communicating; and exploring and thinking. These inscribe a flexible framework for early childhood education which “conveys successfully the integration and holistic

development of the young learner and the totality of his/her learning needs” (NCCA, 2004, p.22). Weisberg (2013, p.41) maintained “play has no specific purpose... playful activities are often exaggerated... and play is joyful and voluntary.” Since play has been historically deemed a distinctive manner of behaviour of the young child, Wood (2004, p.30) explained how play and playful types of activities are “increasingly complex forms of knowledge, skills and understanding” particularly in the “cognitive and social domains”. Vygotsky (1978) maintained that play was the child’s imagination, whereas Gray (2013) argued that play accommodates choice in relation to making use of materials, objects, and thoughts in alternative ways. So, what is play? One of the most quoted definitions of play by Rubin, Fein, and Vandenburg (1983) classifies the principal features of play as a behaviour: namely (a) intrinsically motivated; (b) regulated by those playing; (c) interested with process instead of product; (d) nonliteral; (e) free of externally enforced rules; and (f) represented by the active engagement of those playing.

Children’s viewpoints of play diverge significantly from those of adults (Theobald *et al.*, 2015, Dockett and Perry, 2007). Children characterise play as something you freely select and elect to do: work is characterised as a task which is carried out for the teacher. Both play and work activities may be equally enjoyed by children, since children are occupied in self-selected activities. When children play their freedom of choice can bring about diverse patterns of engagement (Plowman and Stephen, 2007).

The Aistear guidelines delineate several types of play: constructive play which “involves building something using natural and manufactured materials. As children develop, this type of play can become more complex and intricate” (Aistear 2009, p.54); physical play “involves children developing, practising and refining bodily movements and control. It includes whole body and limb movements, co-ordination and balance. These activities involve physical movements for their own sake and enjoyment. Children gain control over their gross motor skills first before refining their fine motor skills” (ibid 2009, p.54); and pretend play which “involves children using their imaginations. It includes pretending with objects, actions, and situations. As children grow, their imaginations and their play become increasingly complex. Children use their developing language skills to move from thinking in the concrete to thinking in the abstract. They invent stories and scenarios, act out real events, and take part in fantasy play about fairies, ghosts, or super heroes. Children” try out roles, occupations, and experiences in their pretend play” (ibid 2009, p.54), while their growing

linguistic competency “involves children playing with sounds and words. It includes unrehearsed and spontaneous manipulation of these, often with rhythmic and repetitive elements. Children like playing with language – enjoying patterns, sounds and nonsense words. They also love jokes and funny stories” (ibid 2009, p.54), and games with rules; “In the beginning children often play by their own rather flexible rules! In time they also partake in more conventional games with ‘external’ rules” (ibid 2009, p.54) to encourage development and learning in the child throughout their day (NCCA, 2009). This chimes with the theory that children profit from a wide variety of play occasions; as diverse styles of play can potentially promote development and learning in diverse ways. Teachers are sometimes unaware that play occupies young children more than anything in the classroom. As such, they must ensure children experience a variety of types of play to support their learning and development across the four Aistear themes of *well-being*, *identity and belonging*, *communicating*, and *exploring and thinking*. Insights from the *Growing Up in Ireland Study* (2018) revealed that the application of whole-class teaching and individual work were the most frequent task configurations in junior and senior infant classrooms. This, while play-based pedagogy was a familiar characteristic of the early years’ classrooms, pretend and creative play were less utilised in senior infant classes than in junior infants classes. Junior infant groups in mixed-grade classes were inclined to include a smaller amount of play-based pedagogy and hands-on activities than those in single-grade classes. Teachers in urban DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools, on the other hand, particularly Urban Band 1 schools, attributed more importance to a range of literacy and numeracy activities, in addition to play-based and hands-on activities than teachers in different schools (NCCA, 2018a).

Fisher, Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff and Gryfe (2008) support the developmental benefits of play as a scaffold for children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development. Through play, they purport children are capable of understanding their reservations pertaining to the world by examining how objects work. For example, when a child is given a new toy to play with or a toy that encourages inquisitiveness, the initial reaction for the child is to find out how it works by way of exploratory play. The child then advances to symbolic play, wherein the child role plays and uses imagination through play. Symbolic play, such as, for example imagining being a horse or imagining a large box is a castle, absorbs the child’s imagination and inventiveness. This form of play offers cognitive benefits to the child which include abstract thinking, symbolic representation, recall and literacy, and language skills.

In addition, play advances children's social development. Social play fosters child collaboration, and enables them to follow rules and cooperate freely with other children, while fantasy play hones children's social competence to eventually evolve into coping approach. The advantages accredited to play, often described as a "play-learning" philosophy, are predicated on the hypothesis that "play, in its many forms, represents a natural, age-appropriate method for children to explore and learn about themselves and the world around them" (Singer and Singer, cited in Fisher, 2008, p.308). In short; play builds skills and thus establishes the strong foundation necessary for higher-order cognitive tasks and educational accomplishment.

Play-based pedagogy was founded on the principle that play is a suitable technique for teaching children in the early years (Frost, Wortham and Reifel, 2008). This pedagogy has long been supported by educators because it is arguably the most suitable learning environment for young children and supports their need for discovery and exploration. Play-based pedagogy works through the principle of teacher-directed and child-initiated activities (Wood, 2004). Essentially, "learning through play is not left to chance but is channelled through complex and reciprocal relationships; it is situated in activities which are socially constructed and mediated" (Wood, 2004, p.34). The challenge lies in the process, as well as the strategy that incorporates the subjects discipline in the activities; in this context, play is not merely about activity, but also includes the art of making this strategy effective.

Wood maintained that the potency of play-based pedagogy is that it supports features of effective pedagogy in "sustained shared thinking, joint involvement, and co-construction" (Wood, 2004, p.21). While play-based pedagogies have been endorsed by early childhood educationalists however, the practical challenges of implementation drag on, and finding the equilibrium between the adult-directed activities and self-initiated activities of children is highly problematic. Play-based pedagogy clearly entails more than play. Even though the principal component of the learning experience is assisted through the process of play, the activities and learning stations planned for excellent learning require thoughtfully designed activities which support learning. Playing is not damaging to children; rather it is pleasurable, entertaining, and valuable, in presenting new concepts (Berk, 2001). In fact, play-based pedagogy is appropriate for all young children since it provides both the structure and the flexibility children need. For the purposes of the present research play-based pedagogy refers to the opportunity for children to learn and develop in a fun environment.

I contend that this approach is most appropriate to children learning in infant classes as it is a more gentle form of educational delivery than formal classrooms and didactic measures.

Throughout this research process, I advocated a play-based approach involving both child-initiated and teacher-supported learning. The teacher encourages children's learning and inquiry through interactions that aim to stretch their thinking to higher levels. Classroom observations confirmed that involvement in play stimulates a child's drive for exploration and discovery. This, in turn, motivates the child to gain mastery over their environment; promoting focus and concentration. It also enables the child to engage in the flexible and higher-level thinking processes essential to lifelong learning, including the inquiry processes of problem solving, analysing, evaluating, applying knowledge, and creativity.

2.2.1 PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY IN INFANT CLASSROOMS

A play-based pedagogy is a tool that enables teachers to harness the power of children's developing thoughts, interests, and competencies (Weis, 1999). The element of play cannot be isolated from the main curriculum, and ultimately equip children to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for successful citizenship in their later years. As a play-based pedagogy involves more than letting children play, it must be scrupulously devised to foster the integration of learning goals. Wood (2004) described the pedagogy of play as a technique wherein teachers develop play-based activities, and create play-learning classrooms and the pedagogical skills and approaches to facilitate, support, and improve learning and teaching through play. Teacher understandings therefore clearly influence the relationships they form with children in their classrooms and they are more likely to provide emotional security when they are "responsive, playful and sensitive to children's emotional needs" (Whitebread 2012, p.33). The development of a playful attitude to learning and teaching in infant classrooms is crucial to implementing Aistear successfully with the PSC. To facilitate a play-based pedagogy, it is essential for teachers to attain a comprehensible theoretical awareness of what play actually is. Some commentators have argued that in order for play to promote high quality learning, it should be prepared well in advance and carefully considered (Wood and Attfield, 2005; Wood, 2004; Broadhead, 2004). The *Aistear User Guide* (NCCA, 2009, User Guide, pp.17-18) shows an example, where infant teachers are urged to exercise 'circle of play' activities for one hour each day. The various Aistear training courses facilitated by education centres similarly encourage an hour of play each day, possibly as disciplined method for infant school teachers to deliver Aistear philosophies to infant

classrooms. This phase of play is worthwhile, as the hour in which children engage in self-directed discovery and forge learning links in a meaningful setting (NCCA, 2009; Wood, 2004). By adopting this approach to play teachers have occasion to facilitate the allocated time for play-based activities through Aistear and to encourage development of children's play and their eventual development and learning (Broadhead, 2004). Understandings which obtain to how children learn can fluctuate from the fundamentals of cognitive development to discourse on learning theories. Frost, Wortham and Reifel's (2008) work in these areas has ring fenced a specific function in the creation of education theories, especially in how best to devise instructional strategies founded on an appreciation on how children learn. Nonetheless, general understandings regarding learning have been characteristically linked with formal schooling environment; either eradicating or reducing the effect of learning outlets even before the child enters a school.

The influential years of human development are critical for many reasons (Bronson, 2001). They function as a time when self-regulation develops through a number of complicated processes which permit children to respond appropriately to their environment (Bronson, 2000). Children should learn to evaluate what they hear, see, taste, touch, and smell, and compare it to what they already know. Children should also then learn to use self-regulation to communicate with the various motor or language systems in order to choose and execute a response. Self-regulation is evidently not a remote skill. Children must transpose what they experience into information which can be used to regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours (Blair and Diamond 2008). Since self-regulation skills develop steadily, it is imperative that teachers hold suitable developmentally expectations for children's behaviour. Vygotsky termed this zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Steiner and Mahn 1996) as the "growing edge of competence" (Bronson 2000, p.20) which signals the skills a child is prepared to learn. Effective teachers use a number of strategies to link the developmental gap between what children already know and can do with more complicated proficiencies and knowledge. Three main teaching strategies are essential for scaffolding children's development of self-regulation: namely, modelling; hints and cues; and slowly retreating adult support. By demonstrating suitable behaviour, teachers show children how to complete a task and use the self-regulation necessary to accomplish it.

Teachers of young children play a critical role in assisting the development of children's self-regulation skills.

Indeed, young children's daily experiences afford plentiful occasions for developing self-regulation. Teachers can also benefit from such opportunities by identifying each child's self-regulation (ZPD) and planning the types of modelling, and/or hints and cues the child requires to maintain development, being alert to opportunities in daily classroom experiences to scaffold self-regulation and retreating support as children start to demonstrate new skills, and overseeing children's activities to assist in their success. When teachers consciously incorporate self-regulation into daily experiences, they equip children to become actively engaged learners and lay the groundwork for future success in school and life. However, because early childhood is also an important period of imaginative play (Singer and Singer, 1990) wherein children think about make-believe situations more than at any other time of their lives, the formulation of balanced self-regulation largely depends on the characteristics of exterior stimuli.

Like Bronfenbrenner (1979), Mead (1934) identified make-believe play as one of the prime stimulus of human development. Bronson (2001) identified self-regulation as the highest accomplishment of early childhood. When children are engaged in any form of play, whether make-believe, pretend play, or listening to stories offered in a playful way, they become responsive to learning concepts and developing relationships (Hirsh-Pasek *et al.*, 2008). Children's thinking is embedded in a context which has some meaning to them, whereas to a great extent school is 'disembedded' (Moyles, 2001. p.14). Activities, such as, for example "filling in the blanks", worksheets and "colouring in" are frequently removed from meaning and purpose for the child and consequently make the process of learning more complex (Moyles, 2001, p.14). Worksheets are not developmentally appropriate for young children, and often result in reduced engagement. In addition, worksheets only have one correct answer and anxiety about being wrong can engender a fear of taking risk. Moreover, Kamii maintained that "worksheets encourage obedience, passivity, and the mechanical application of techniques" (Kamii, 1985, p.120). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1989) provides a framework which places individual development in the context in which it takes place. As a result, the child develops not in isolation but through relationships and society.

The effortlessly integrated relationship between play and children's development has persistently attracted the interest of researchers. In 1991 a consensus among professionals engaged in preschool events with the Alliance for Childhood, National Association for the

Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) (Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 1992) claimed regardless of socioeconomic, cultural, and/or linguistic background, play in early childhood is the most valuable tool for cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and moral development (Elkind, 2007). In fact, play is the worldwide verbal communication of young children; irrespective of culture and socioeconomic position, children have been observed to play, interact, and communicate with each other. As play is neither language specific, or culturally sensitive, it is a vital vehicle for worldwide learning.

2.2.2 PLAY VS. STRUCTURED ACTIVITIES IN INFANT CLASSROOMS

Vickerius and Sandberg (2006) define play-based pedagogy as a tool which enables children to explore and understand their environment and surroundings. They further posit play-based pedagogy to be a means of motivating and satisfying children, while developing language and social skills in the process. Logue and Harvey (2010) regard play-based pedagogy as a process for children to identify and discover their own boundaries and how they affect others. The children are encouraged to engage the various skills and events which permit them to appreciate how their behaviour influences others in these circumstances (ibid). Play-based pedagogy presents children with hands-on experience in a secure environment (ibid, 2009). It is also perceived as work for young children, where they discover about their environment and through which relationships are created (Youell, 2007). The curricular and methodologies applied to the education of young children have been many and diverse, frequently mirroring the educational reform or policy of the country. Developmental theories, particularly those concerning cognitive development, stress young children's lack of readiness to take in abstract knowledge and their limited attention spans, both of which hinder their learning (Marcon, 2002). Teaching overly abstract ideas to young children, which happens during formal instruction, can negatively influence their self-esteem in that they may be frequently be unsuccessful in performing tasks for which they are not yet developmentally prepared. In a longitudinal study of pre-school children, Marcon (2002) maintained that children who experienced academically focused preschool curricula had a lower rate of retention and poorer grades than children who attended a child-initiated preschool curricula. Such findings have not prevented preschool staff from pursuing academically purposeful curricula, and indeed, literacy, numeracy, and reading were consistently accentuated at a high volume number of preschools (Marcon, 2002).

Numerous studies (Chang, Stipek and Garza, 2006; Singer, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek, 2006) have demonstrated that structured, teacher-directed methods of teaching fail to kindle interest in children and are therefore unproductive in generating academic achievement. Conversely, methods which incorporate children's self-initiated activities and curiosity create positive outcomes. They also raised concerns that overuse of didactic teaching was likely to repress child-initiated learning, thereby diminishing young children's self-confidence and motivation to learn. Very young children's focus on emotional security underscores that didactic procedures of learning is not developmentally appropriate at this period due to emotional vulnerability. Didactic teaching can be challenging for children and discourage their nascent assertiveness and risk-taking. This consequently represses their risk-taking abilities, which in turn, compromises problem-solving skills since the latter involves a component of risk. Opportunities in play-based pedagogy centres provided wide opportunities for learning and building skills through real and meaningful situations.

It is widely established that high-quality pretend play is linked to children's ability to think abstractly and to examine ideas from the viewpoint of others (Berk, 2006; Bergen, 2002). Additionally, researchers have also acknowledged the connections between the intricacy of children's pretend play and early literacy, mathematical thinking, and problem-solving (Singer *et al*, 2006; Smilansky and Shefatya, 1990). Three essential considerations act as clues to the progression of development happening when children are at play: namely, (1) children are exposed to occasions to exercise their imagination; (2) they are able to integrate social, physical, emotional, and intellectual skills for their development; and (3) incentive to learn is high, letting children become enthusiastically occupied in the learning progression. Additionally, children may do extremely well when developing new ideas through activities that take place naturally to them (Trawick-Smith and Picard, 2003). This basis returns play to the forefront. Play can promote these activities by harnessing tasks such as counting, sorting, sequencing, predicting, hypothesising, or evaluating. Children meet such barriers with a stimulated mentality because they are playing, and in the context of the play procedure the children understand the importance of such tasks and extend themselves to master them (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff and Eyer, 2003).

Researchers and child proponents recommend accentuating play-based pedagogy and child-centred activities in the curriculum. Greater financial support for research and training to enhance implementation of play-based pedagogy in cognitive development of children should include familiarising parents with the qualities of play-based pedagogy and its

prominence in their child's cognitive development, and repeated assessment and documented observations of children during play-based pedagogy. Play-based pedagogy is a developmentally appropriate teaching and learning methodology for young children in junior and senior infant classrooms in primary schools in Ireland. The infant area of the PSC is "based on the uniqueness of the child" and "the emphasis it gives to the element of play" as an essential teaching method for young children, owing to its informal characteristics and occasions for children to investigate their environments and acquire new knowledge (DES, 1999b, p.30). Nonetheless, play-based pedagogy as a teaching and learning method is referred to just twice more in the individual subject curricula. This omission from the curriculum decreases the perception of significance for those who eventually choose to employ the component of play-based pedagogy. This problematises teacher employment of successful play-based pedagogy when implementing the infant curriculum. While it is also a principle in Aistear, there is no single, unified definition of play which is collectively understood. In consequence, it can and has been interpreted in a diversity of ways by both adults and children.

2.2.3 BARRIERS OF PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY IN INFANT CLASSROOMS

The literature identified a number of obstacles to the successful implementation of play-based pedagogy in infant classes: namely, time restrictions; large class sizes; shortage of space; and lack of CPD (Gray and Ryan, 2016). Findings from the present study confirm that regardless of the current political support of a play-based approach, play receives only tangential positioning in infant classes in primary classrooms in Ireland with teachers still identifying formal didactic teaching as the proper work of the day (ibid, 2016). It is likely that this has contributed to a general reluctance to implement play in educational settings where teachers are unconvinced by the pedagogy (Wood and Attfield, 2005; Hayes, 2004).

2.2.3.1 TIME/CLASS SIZE/SPACE/CPD

Numerous primary schools have inadequate play areas for children and many lack multipurpose rooms for play. Older school buildings are inclined to have smaller physical classrooms which work against the application of play, active learning and/or hands-on experiences. Schools are challenged to locate storage space for the resources where they do have them. Montessori (cited in Smith *et al.*, 2005) held that the learning environment should be thoroughly planned to meet children's needs by affording them as many occasions as possible to work autonomously, make choices, decisions, and problem solve, to be immersed

in real experiences, and to experience achievement. The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation (2001) recommended the space should be welcoming for children and divided into clearly-defined areas of interest to promote distinctive forms of play. Hohmann and Weikart (1995, p.113) urged that “the interest areas are arranged to promote visibility and easy movement between areas and are flexible to accommodate ... children’s changing interests”. Steiner further advocated a selection of easily available, open-ended, natural, real life, resources to can be applied in imaginative and purposeful ways and mirror children’s family lives (Curtis and O’Hagan, 2003). Materials are also stored in order that children can locate, use, and restore the required materials.

The most successful learning is derived from uncomplicated but versatile materials and environments which broaden the child’s imagination and can be modified by children to match their learning requirements and level of comprehension. Dowling (2001, p.10) referred to this as an “informational environment which supports children’s ability to make and learn from mistakes, discover the best way of doing things and learn how to make decisions”. The power of the environment is summarised in Malaguzzi’s (1996, p.40) words: “... we consider the environment to be an essential constituent element of any theoretical or political research in education ... we place enormous value on the role of the environment as a motivating and animating force in creating spaces for relations, options, and emotional and cognitive situations that produce a sense of well-being and security” It is in this environment, Vygotsky maintains, where learning takes place, since it impels children towards higher developmental levels more willingly than remaining static.

In a study of the consequences of class size on teaching in infant classes, Blatchford *et al.* (2002b) observed that teachers do not encounter pupils outside the classroom environment. Several features of contextual conditions linked with school classrooms influence play provision and children’s experience of play in the classroom. Sestini (1987) noted that children's play in the school environment was inadequate due to the inaccessibility of the space, the time sanctioned for the development of their play, the poor scale of resourcing, and degree to which their activity was directed towards teacher expectations.

2.2.3.2 TIME

Various elements of the relationship connecting time and provision for play in the classroom are examined in the literature.

In the context of the introduction of the National Curriculum in England, teachers highlighted the complexity of allocating time for everything in the context of curriculum overload (Wood, 1998): play being part of the overall programme. Keating *et al* (2000, p.441) made “comparable comments where the weight of curriculum is made noticeable through time considerations”. Teachers’ professed prioritisation of their desk-based written work resulted in an inadequate time provision for children to develop their play. Likewise, Sestini (1987) observed children having to end their play after fifteen or twenty minutes so as to offer other children a turn. Such time deficiencies gave rise to a number of diminutive cognitive challenges. Sestini claims that since the children in his study perceived play as a social activity, they did not connect play with the learning element of school. In terms of social activity, Broadhead (2004) declared that interruptions to play prohibited play from developing into greater sociability and cooperation. Sestini (1987) disagreed that children’s outlooks were corollary to their understandings of teachers’ respect levels and deficiency of involvement in play, the abridged time teachers endorsed for play, and their practice of interjecting children’s play. Teachers utilised the time they spent playing to continue with other teaching tasks; for example, listening to children read or grading written work, which took children from their play. In practice, this signals that formal activities, most frequently literacy work, were considered more significant than play.

Keating *et al* (2000) state that children openly accepted that play was not as significant as work. This aligns with Martlew and colleagues’ (2011) contention that the quantity of time a teacher assigns to play conveys a clear evaluation of its importance and significance to the students. In a study which elaborates upon a number of the issues raised by Sestini (1987) around conditions associated with play in infant classes, Stevenson (1982) outlines the effect of teacher disruptions on children’s play in order to pursue the reading and writing tasks associated with formal instruction. Such interruptions to play merely compound the inadequate play time allotted. Thus, while the child who is removed from play is interrupted, so too are the children who stay at play as the group structure is interrupted and may not subsist. Rogers and Evans (2007, p.160) assert that the practice of taking children away from their play for reading or phonics work, or other disruptions, is the “single most disruptive factor in the quality of children’s role play.”. A further feature of the effect of time on play in classrooms is the frequency with which children may instigate and guide their own activity, and the relationship between child initiated/led activity and adult led activity.

It is recognised that, amongst the main characteristics of play, the child's self-determination in play is extremely important (Wood, 2013; Martlew *et al.*, 2011).

In the context of innovations devised to modify practice among teachers working with young children in primary schools, play-based pedagogy promoted a more equitable of time division of between child-led and adult-led activity, and enhanced equilibrium between play, written work and activities, as compared to a conventional classroom. The PSC Department of Education and Science (DES, 1999b, p.69-70) time allocation guidelines are indicative rather than prescriptive. The priority is for children to encounter meaningful learning experiences and this, it is suggested, requires an adaptable use of time. While the literature is clear that children require extended time periods "to build momentum in their play" (Broadhead, 2004, p.3) and that teachers should discontinue interrupting play, the dearth of in-depth data on how class time is assigned by teachers of infant classes hampers a proper exploration of whether they include extended play sessions into the infant day.

2.2.3.3 CLASS SIZE

Little is said about class size and the consequence of class size on the provision of play in schools. While several studies have confirmed that infant class size directly affects children's learning performance (Sirij-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002), empirical research into the consequence of class size on play provision or on children's play experiences in school has proved more problematic. Class size is a critical issue in Ireland as they routinely exceed the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) standard (OECD, 2012). Children in infant classes in Ireland are often be in groups of 30 (Donnelly, 2007) or above. A small number of studies of play in classrooms interrogate the impact of class size on both provision and the children's experience. However, most literature which refers to the effect of class size on play in the classroom feature engages with teachers who recognise class size as a restriction on their capacity to offer play (Taylor *et al.*, 2004; Keating *et al.*, 2000; Wood and Bennett, 2001; Bennett *et al.*, 1997). Martlew *et al* (2011) noted that children exhibit higher levels of commitment throughout small group work. Stevenson (1987) credited teachers on 'work' activities more willingly than on play interactions to class size, and the complexity for the teacher to get to every child.

From their classroom observations, Martlew *et al* (2011) educed that the modification from traditional classroom practice to practice based on purposeful play was deemed difficult

in terms of both physical constraint and the greater number of children in the classrooms. Martlew *et al's* (2011) summation in the context of curriculum modification in Scotland were reiterated in Siraj-Blatchford *et al's* (2005) findings from an assessment of the Foundation Phase Project in Wales. They concurred that enhancing the ratios of adults to children was one of the amendments necessary for services to offer more active learning and play opportunities (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2005). Nonetheless, Siraj-Blatchford *et al* (2005) cautioned that reducing ratios and/or class sizes is not an assurance of enhanced quality, but rather a component of a network of contextual characteristics consisting of staff qualifications and training which play a part to complete effectiveness. Thus, while the available evidence indicates that class size can impact the provision of play in the classroom and children's play experiences, further empirical research to examine the interrelationship of the two, and the mediating processes, is required to fully evaluate the matter. Nevertheless, the very large class sizes in infant classes in Ireland arguably or limit or obstruct on the introduction of play.

2.2.3.4 SPACE

There is no clear differentiation between issues of class size and classroom space. Several of the positive effects observed in children's behaviour following class size reduction may in fact be due to an increase in personal space and to the student/space ratio. Sirij-Blatchford *et al* (2002) observed how the restricted space for a class of 37 gave rise of poor classroom behaviour. Likewise, Rogers and Evans (2007) identified substantial impact on role play in the classroom generated by the "poverty of space". Since the role play area of the classrooms observed was usually a small corner divided off from the main room, the number of children allowed to play in the area was equally restricted. Not surprisingly, the researchers observed that the children's games appeared to be inhibited by the shortage of space. Rogers and Evans (2007) found that lack of space, and other contextual elements, obliged the teachers to manage children's play through 'containment'. Boys and girls experienced 'containment' of their play in diverse ways relative to the gender and space available; girls appeared to self-contain their play in the indoor space; boys' more boisterous play became challenging in the restricted space of the classroom.

As recommended by Rogers and Evans (2007), the way in which the classroom space is organised can have an influence on provision for play. A specific characteristic of school classrooms is the provision of student tables and chairs; an aspect observed and remarked on by the OECD (2004) corresponding to infant classes in Ireland.

Indeed, Martlew *et al* (2011) described the Scottish classrooms they observed as “dominated” by tables and chairs. This had consequences for the way concrete resources were used. In what they portrayed as a traditional classroom in the Australian state of Victoria, Reynolds *et al* (2011) notes that the classroom consisted of tables with a chair for every child as a pre-requisite to subject teaching. Cleave and Brown (1991) report teachers removing school furniture to create additional space for activities including play. Although some teachers felt children did not require a designated seat at which to sit every day, Cleave and Brown (1991) found that several maintained that they required sufficient chairs for all children to sit all together; for example, in order to eat lunch.

Pascal’s (1990) study considered classroom layout in detail and analysed how the layout aligned with teachers’ teaching and learning priorities. Within the process, Pascal (1990) also considered how the arrangement of the physical environment of the classroom manipulates the curriculum that takes place within it. The manner in which the teachers prepared the classroom space approximated their perception of the relationship between their stated position on suitable practice and the practice itself: a relationship which was generally found to be inconsistent. While Gooch (2008) disputes that notion that the decisions made by a teacher regarding child’s learning and development environment reflect teacher’s viewpoints on education, there is an arguable correlation between the distribution of space and the teaching styles implemented in the classroom. Objectively, there seems little reason why classroom space may not be modified to promote play activity. As such, teachers should be encouraged to revise their use of space as a component of change of practice towards play.

2.2.3.5 CPD

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) refers to learning and development experiences teachers undergo to extend their skills, knowledge, and experience beyond their initial professional training. It consists of formal coursework, conferences, and the informal learning opportunities afforded by practice. During the past decade the CPD of teachers in Ireland has attracted persistent academic attention (Loxley *et al.*, 2007; Sugrue, 2002). Much of this research has centred on assessing teacher education policy over time in order to track development via the policy documents and reports of the past twenty years. Contemporary expectations in teaching, learning, and assessment, mean that teachers are now required to engage in more interactive relationship with students, teaching colleagues, and parents. Much of the more current research has acknowledged key barriers in the area of CPD in Ireland.

One of the key barriers identified both in Ireland and internationally, is the short-term ‘one-off workshop’ model. Furthermore, current CPD and teacher in-service assessment studies highlight the disjointed nature of CPD and the shortage of learner-centred structures (Loxley *et al.*, 2007; Sugrue, 2002). This challenge may be attributed to the diversity of CPD accessible at primary level, as well as the disjointed nature of provision across school sectors.

According to Benjamin (2011), in order for a potential teacher to develop their professional identity he/she must first learn the significance of the role of teacher and expectations of teachers as a group relative to students, teachers, and members of the broader society. Consequently teachers must develop a comprehensible teaching philosophy, a realistic awareness of personal abilities, and insight into how experiences, emotions, and motivations contribute to professional performance (Benjamin, 2011). Inclusion in a professional learning community helps the teacher to forge a professional identity which inheres a mutual understanding of roles and the meanings accredited to them (Benjamin, 2011). From a social interaction stance, association with a professional peer group provides a socially shared definition of professional roles and contexts for the individual and helps to form an individuated belief system (Blumer, 1969). These beliefs may evolve as the individual moves through different experiences that form or modify the individual’s life experiences and how they see themselves and their relationships with others around them. Such beliefs also serve as a barometer which enables the teacher to measure their own standards against that of the wider group and to determine whether any changes based on the meaning the teacher derives from the experience are needed.

All infant teachers should have CPD when applying Aistear to support learning and teaching. In Gray and Ryan’s (2016) study comparison of Aistear (2009) and the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (1999), teachers highlighted concerns about their ability to teach curriculum subjects through play, and also identified deficiencies in the training required to implement a play-based approach to learning. Clearly, for the successful implementation of Aistear in infant classes the above issues need to be addressed. O’Connor and Angus (cited in Gray and Ryan, 2016, p.15) recommend that the DES “formally adopt Aistear, train teachers in it fully and use it to replace the 1999 curriculum rather than have the two attempt to co-exist when there are such evident compatibility issues”. Since teachers are expected to earn professional regard and respect for their work, they should have access to levels of professional support and resourcing which enable them to deliver the most favourable

learning environments for children. CPD should provide teachers with practical ideas for using play in the infant classroom, review teacher current play resources, and ascertain how they plan for, resource, support, and assess learning through child-led play. As it stands, the OECD state Aistear is demanding to work with; largely due to a lack of sufficient professional development support for CPD. Indeed, the NCCA has frequently alluded to the relative absence of national CPD to support the implementation of Aistear. Whatever the cause, the Aistear curriculum framework has proved challenging for practitioners to access and use; so much so, that in 2015 the DES and DCYA commissioned the NCCA to produce the *Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide* in order to “support practitioners in the implementation of the emergent and inquiry based learning advocated in Aistear” (OECD, 2017).

Dunphy (2008) maintained that infant teachers exhibited a less than coherent understanding of ECCE, implying that developmental and educational occasions during play are at risk of being irrevocably lost. Practicing in a professional way requires that individuals have skills, knowledge, value, and attitudes commensurate with their role and responsibility within the setting. In addition, it calls for frequent reflection upon practice and engagement within supported ongoing professional development (Síolta, 2006). However, teachers reveal divergent apprehensions of the rationale for and advantages of a play-based pedagogy and need formal lessons to facilitate children to rehearse skills for socialising, turn-taking, and so forth (McGuinness *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, since the majority of curriculum development and change is devised at macro level and handed down, teachers are seldom involved or consulted in the process.

Curriculum leadership on play-based pedagogy is another worrying issue. Play can generate organisational issues for teachers: a number of the participants cited the demands entailed in managing children involved in multiple, concurrent activities with large teacher-pupil ratios (Murphy, 2004). Bearing in mind the average primary school class size is 24.9 students, it is clear that Irish infant classrooms are not appropriately designed to assist the requirements of young children in the early years. Irish teachers typically teach three extra students per class and Irish class sizes continue to be the second highest in the EU. As such, it is arguable that smaller adult-child ratios in infant classes would facilitate the type of learning espoused in Aistear (DES, 2011).

Numerous additional elements influence the level of activity and a play-based pedagogy to learning in infant classrooms; an overloaded curriculum; the suitability of the physical classroom to provide for the *infant* curriculum; effective curriculum delivery to different ability/age groups; the importance positioned on early years play pedagogies; teacher training content; lack of funding and resources; and the inadequate condition of resources (NCCA, 2010; INTO, 2006; Murphy, 2004). Murphy (2004) characterised play in infant classrooms as a “time-filler” with no effort on utilising play to advance learning. Since such negative assessments create complications for those infant teachers attempting to apply Aistear in the infant classroom, formulating a method to break down these barriers is vital if Aistear is to be successfully implemented.

2.3 THEORIES OF LEARNING IN ECCE

The theoretical frameworks utilised in this study are based on social constructivist theories which gather together theories of learning, wherein individuals and the environment both shape and are shaped by one another through constant communication and interaction; for instance, socio-cultural theories and bio-ecological system theories. Theoretical views on child development directly impact how a teacher interacts with children. These theorists were specifically chosen for the present research study because they both agree that learning is not merely an individual, internal procedure, but is rather constructed by the interactions of people and the language, tools, signs and symbols intrinsic to particular contexts or settings. As such, both theorists underscore the social element and impact of the wider social, historical, and cultural environments on learning.

2.3.1 MEAD’S THEORY OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

While Mead (1934) did not specifically expound on play-based pedagogy, he was renowned for his conceptualisation of how children understand roles and themselves in those roles. Through his work he purported that the self is formed through from social interactions when we are young. Learning through play-based pedagogy and discovering one’s character is a significant element in the development and socialisation of all people. Mead theorises that human communication and interaction is supported by language, body movements, and other symbols. This is based on three aspects: 1) human beings respond to things derived from the meaning that they allocate to them; 2) human beings are not born knowing the meaning of things around them: rather meaning occurs out of social interaction with other people and language; and 3) when human beings form meaning through social interaction,

these meanings are modified through self-reflection. This meaning takes place in the context of relationships with significant others and includes such things as physical objects, human beings and institutions. Mead claims that pedagogy should happen as an interchange or conversation. This the place of origin for educational development should reside in the experiences of the child. These experiences can then be brought to the classroom “to be interpreted” through the experiences of the teacher. If this form of give-and-take does not take place, Mead continues, the attention and focus of the student will be scattered and unable to concentrate on the task at hand.

Cooley underlines self-conceptualisation as crucial to social interaction. In an effort to comprehend teacher behaviours, it is necessary to examine the specific location where teachers work. Ecological and environmental psychology offers a context to analyse the relations linking the environment and behaviour. Williams *et al* (1985) stated, “Four elements functioning together: an organization, its members, its work and its physical environment – form an ecology, an ever-changing web of relationships that aims to accomplish whatever the organization exists for– to educate people, to make furniture, or to process insurance claims” (Williams, Armstrong and Malcolm, 1985, p.5).

This literature review is derived from the importance of play-based pedagogy from a social point of view on children’s learning. Mead (1863 -1931) developed a two-part dyad of the *self*: namely: *I* and *me*. He maintained that *I* represents dissimilarities among people, while *me* represents similarities among people. *I* is the element of the self that is natural, and this consists of creative, spontaneous and exclusive elements. The *me* is socialised into the skills necessary for functioning effectively in society or in a specific society, and wherein the values, norms, statuses, roles of society, have been internalised. It is through such a construction, and the ensuing capability to put yourself in someone else’s position, that children can provide this reflective capability. *I* represents our inner demands, whereas the *me* stands for societal demands. The initial people who inflict limits on the *I* are described as significant others. While they may also be deemed ‘role models’, there is a slight difference; role models are individuals whom we have a tendency to think highly of or individuals we would like to please. For the purposes of this research study, ‘role model’ refers to the infant teacher while the specific other refers to the role a child takes on when occupied in play.

Mead used the metaphor of a game and its players to demonstrate how human individuals internalise the attitudes of all other members of their group so as to comprehend meaning, have an idea of self, and/or know how to behave and respond. The individual must engage in the group's attitude regarding himself and everything else incorporating other groups and their interaction. The development of individuation consists of two main parts: educating the attitudes of all other members of the group and then systematising those into "a generalized other". This permits the individual to develop the greatest and most moral and self-conscious self. Our self-consciousness permits us to act in response to ourselves as a consequence of the responses of others. This allows groups and communities to operate effortlessly since all members share general attitudes. When playing, a child is involved in an individual role at any one time. However, referring to game play consists of more complex ability, since the person must adopt the personality of a specific and single other. They must also control and understand the regulations of the game play in addition to the roles of others who are participating; the attitudes of others bring about the 'generalised other'. During the game stage, children learn to consider several roles at the same time and how those roles interact with each other. From this generalised other the individual characterises his/her own behaviour. Only when the individual is competent to look at himself/herself from the point of view of others, has the notion of self taken place.

At this point, the concept of *self* consists of opinions of others who are occupied in an activity since the self within the child is a result of social interactions with people (Mead, 1934). Through game play, the child is competent to sustain intimate relationships with peers and can perceive things from their own viewpoint; particularly when performing or engaging in role-play activities. The child now appreciates why individuals act in the manner that they do; and also develops a consideration for rules, and gains self-control along with an awareness for others beliefs and cultures. This "involves significant change in underlying values and knowledge structure - is always the subject of an organizational predicament" (Schön, 1983, p.328).

While children are engaged in play-based pedagogy, they are open to every type of activity in which they wish to participate; even performing roles they may not have been competent to display before in an actual situation. During interplay between children, the primary importance of play-based pedagogy is to acquire and have friends. Friends are significant for children as Mead (1934) believed they become aware of themselves through

others. During this interplay, children's increasing consciousness of themselves (child), the society (school), and the wider group (infant classroom) lays much of the groundwork for the child's personality and moral development (Mead, 1934). To engage in this process of *self*, a person must view himself or herself through the eyes of others. According to Mead (1934), this is not an innate human skill. The main thread of Mead's theory is that people who reciprocally interact have a tendency to impact one another. Cooley (1902) highlighted that individual's understandings of each other directly impact their behaviour. Mead (1934) explains how people come to accept society's beliefs, to understand societal norms and to be aware of societal values in a variety of ways; indicating that the notion of *self* emerges from experience. In short; it was not *in* the child when participating in the activity; it developed from experiences obtained *by* the child. Children carry on adjusting and modifying their behaviour in response to the manner in which people respond to them. In Mead's opinion, the critical element of the *self* is its capacity for self-reflection.

Mead's theory of the sequence of development which everybody goes through is separated into phases of increasing volumes for role play. Like Cooley (1902) Mead (1934) hypothesised different *selves*, working in relationships with different people. In contrast to Cooley however, Mead proposed stages in self-development. The first is the *preparatory stage*, wherein children can only imitate the actions of others whom they frequently interact with, such as parents and siblings. They have no capacity to envisage the perceptions of others. The *play stage* follows, wherein children start to replicate and adopt roles which an additional person may possibly have through role play. While children at this stage are still unable to adopt such roles in a reliable and logical way, they enter and exit the transient processes of role play effortlessly. The *game stage* is next, wherein children become adept at thinking about numerous specific roles simultaneously and how those roles act together. Children learn to appreciate interactions connecting different people with a range of objectives while simultaneously acknowledging that role play entails a coherent collection of rules. Lastly, children understand, develop and learn the concept of the "generalised other" and the behavioural mores of their culture.

Mead held that the idea of self evolves during three specific types of activity; language; play; and games. The child's symbolic capabilities are clearly seen through language development and its interaction through important symbols. At this point, the child can accommodate the thoughts of others towards self.

Language forms the groundwork for an appreciation of self in the child. Every time the child communicates with others or takes on a role, he/she is equipped to store this activity in his/her memory. From that moment, the child is equipped to think back to *self* and is able to relate with *self* as an individual. In this manner, the child learns to sustain a conversation with *self* as a means of acting out a previous phenomenon. Therefore, play assists the child to comprehend himself/herself in addition to the people encircling him/her. The notion of *self* is created as a consequence of social experiences and activities.

Play-based pedagogy is then a progression of social experiences and activities signifying that the development of every person is a consequence of communications with people through games, sports, or play. A child who participates in game play communicates with other children and at the same time understands the individuality of others. Likewise, a child who participates in play-based pedagogy is cognisant of actual life situations, particularly when the child adopts a social role, such as a professional (teacher, veterinarian, butcher, and so on) during play. When a child is occupied in this manner they understand the reason people act in this way. This feature of play-based pedagogy could be related to Piaget's explanation of play as assimilation (Piaget, 1962). Piaget considered that intellect is a type of adaptation, where learning is built by each person through assimilation and accommodation. Piaget hypothesised that as children interconnect with their social and physical environments, they arrange information into clusters of interconnected ideas called "schemes". Whenever children encounter something different or novel, they must assimilate this new data into an extant scheme or create a completely original scheme to deal with it (Wadsworth, 1996). In this situation, the child assimilates roles viewed by people, particularly adults, around him/her by performing them through play. This is not a facsimile of the child's normal personality, but rather is the precise role the child is participating in at a specific moment in time. "This configuration of roles-organized-according-to-rules brings the attitudes of all participants together to form a symbolized unity: this unity is the 'generalized other'" (Mead, 1934, p.154).

2.3.2 BRONFENBRENNER'S SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY (1979)

Teachers who implement play-based pedagogy must work as part of an external system whose associations have the potential to influence and impact teacher understandings in various ways. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological systems theory, (Figure 2) offers a theoretical framework for understanding the intricacy of teacher understandings.

Children belong to, and have associates with, these different systems: these associates can alter at any level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner proposed that while the child is influenced by these social ecological systems, so too is the teacher. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model was used to analyse teachers' understandings within the ecological contexts of teacher preparation/training (exosystem) and classroom environment (microsystem). His model provided a valuable framework for understanding the interconnectedness between the provision of play-based pedagogy, teacher education and professional development, availability of resources, and children's experiences. While the centre circles are stationary by nature, Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.22) holds that "bidirectional influences" between each system impact on the child's development:

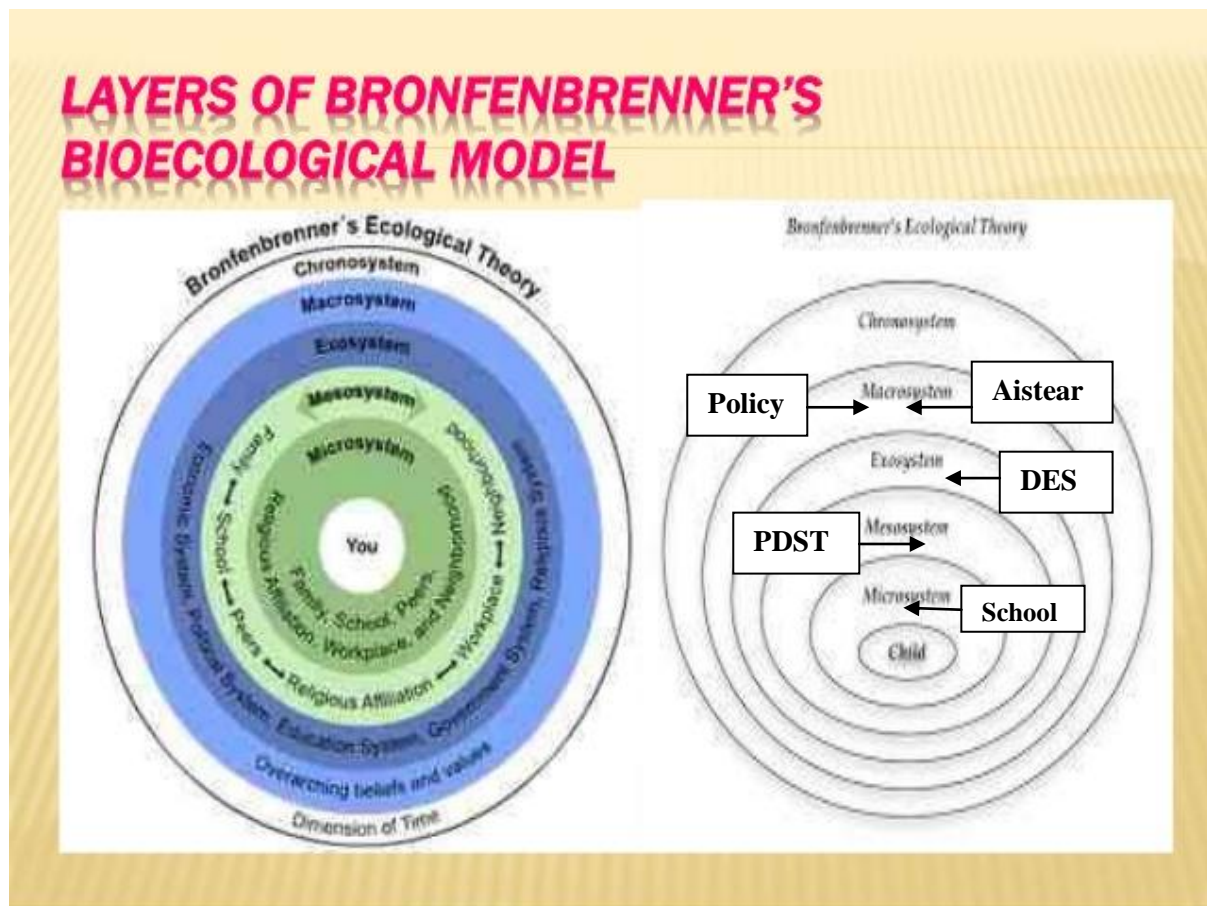


Figure 2: Application of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Social Ecological Framework to the Research Process

This model depicts the interconnectedness of different levels and the connection on the microsystem where the child experiences everyday life in the infant classroom. This framework was employed to:

1. learn about children's experiences within individual contexts by observing them within specific setting contexts (classroom observations)
2. observe classroom practice (including interactions, time use and teaching and learning strategies) by observing and utilising the Assessment and Planning for Children's Learning (Barnardos, 2012)
3. examine teacher preparation and professional development, by interviewing infant teachers (individual interviews).

This research is positioned within the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model which states that development takes place via reciprocal interactions between the child, other persons, and objects located within a set of nested environments including the family and immediate community. This theory recognises the importance of both the individual, and the context and the interactions between them. The primary rationale for employing the bio-ecological model as the main reference point within this research is grounded in the fact that in conjunction with children's biological make up, learning through play occurs through their own actions, and the interactions with the adults they encounter and develop relationships with within a range of environments. In short; this theory attaches a role to the adults in the environments the children inhabit.

Focusing on the context element, bio-ecological theory retains the model of nested systems ranging from the most direct or immediate settings in the child's experience to the more remote contexts of the child's life, "each inside the other like a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.3). Children are recognised as active agents in their development. A child's abilities and capabilities can be derived from within themselves, their family, their community, and their extended social environment. The microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) incorporates the biological make up and the relationships and interactions of the child in their immediate environment. At the microsystem level, bidirectional influences are strongest and have the greatest impact on the child. The fact that the structure most conducive to a child's development is their own family is hardly surprising. Within this system the immediate environment of a child starting school is considered to include their family, their childcare, their preschool and school environment, and certain elements of their community. The mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) incorporates the connections of the structures in the microsystem. In this way parents assume the role of supporting the child with their education as learning; thus, education and knowledge that is delivered in preschool and school

nonetheless should be supported in the home. The exosystem is composed of contexts that have some bearing on the person's behaviour and development; while a child does not necessarily feature in this layer, their development is affected by events occurring in these other settings. The exosystem indirectly shapes a child's development. The macro system (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) encompasses culture, macro institutions, and the laws and policies of the country. Together these components influence the nature of interaction within all the other layers. Norms, values, customs, and policies both at the national and local level can determine the ethos, resources, opportunities, and constraints which obtain in the area and/or the family in which children are raised.

Further to this, the socioeconomic status of families falls under the macrosystem. Social policies and different income families will also be considered in this research within the designated disadvantaged area involved in this study. The impact of the macro system on children is obvious in Ireland; since the onset of the recession employment levels decreased and child poverty has increased (UNICEF; 2014). The chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1984) recognises the dimension of time and timing as it relates to a child and their environment both externally and internally throughout all other systems. Human development cannot be separated from social history (Elder, 1994). This is explicable as the historical components of the external environment are embedded in society and shape the experiences, events, and development of a child. Historical elements of time include the structure and the socioeconomic status of the family. Each of these systems is recognised as integrated and interrelated in this study. This model comprises four interrelated components; process-person-context-time (PPCT). Process encompasses particular forms of interaction between organisms and environments which vary due to the characteristics of the person, the context, and the time periods; thus placing children as active participants in the centre of the system. Taking account of the biological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural features of the individual child, the combination of three main characteristics exerts the greatest influence on development: dispositions; bioecological resources of ability, experience, knowledge and skill to facilitate proximal processes; and demand characteristics that invite or discourage reactions from the social environment. This stresses the significance of accounting for the person in development studies.

In relation to context the microsystem was redefined and expanded in the updated model to emphasise the role of the person's characteristics and interactions.

The microsystem is recognised as “a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p.1645). More emphasis is also placed on the time component of the model. Time is most evident and applicable to the micro, meso, and macro levels. Thus, microtime refers to continuity versus discontinuity within ongoing episodes of proximal processes; mesotime is the periodicity of these episodes across broader time intervals such as days and weeks; and finally, macrotime focuses on the changing expectations and events in the larger society, both within and across generations, as they affect, and are affected by, processes and outcomes of human development over the life course. A developing child can be affected by their own actions and the understandings and the practices of the people who surround them. These understandings and practices can be affected by factors such as culture, national policies, and socio-economic status. Therefore, this is the rationale for using this model as a guide in this research as “the ultimate goal of this line of research is to understand social processes and the important influences on transition ecology to guide policy and practice” (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta, 2000, p.505).

Providing progressively more complex activities is essential for development. Caution is also advised with interpretation of these concepts as the emphasis is placed on the adults and peers in furthering the child’s development without accounting for the role of the child in the interaction (Hayes, 2004). On the other hand, Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.60) places heavy emphasis on “learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity with someone with whom that person has developed a strong and enduring emotional attachment and when the balance of power gradually shifts in favour of the developing person”. Another social constructivist, Rogoff (1990, p. vii) further maintains that interactions “provide guidance, support, direction, challenge, and impetus” guide children’s participation and act as catalysts for cognitive growth. Thus, adults and more skilled peers contribute to children’s development and learning and school readiness by responding appropriately and providing sufficient stimulation in interactions on task and also by facilitating the child’s participation in the interaction.

2.4 HISTORY OF PRIMARY SCHOOL IN IRELAND

To understand the present the past must be first understood. Education in Ireland is compulsory from age six to sixteen. In 1831, a new education system was implemented with its objective of offering non-denominational education for every child in Ireland. The National School system was set up “to cultivate good feeling between parties that may have been at variance” (Hyland and Milne, 1987, p.116). Having no age restrictions, children from two years of age were allowed to attend school. In 1884, a higher age limit of three years of age was introduced: this became law and children had to be at school by their seventh birthday. The lower age restriction for starting school was again increased to four years of age in 1934 (Flood and Hardy, 2013). During this time, the significance of education in the early years was acknowledged in theory, but was overlooked in reality (ibid, 2013). Local domination of education by members of the clergy was a distinguishing characteristic of the system and one which continued throughout the twentieth century. The system was fashioned by the religious, political, and social mores of the nineteenth century (Akenson, 1970). In 1838, the Model Infant School in Marlborough Street, Dublin was opened, with the notion that this school would serve as a template for other infant schools nationwide. In spite of this, only a small number of purpose-built infant schools were established. Young children were still being educated in large, inadequately resourced classrooms countrywide.

As the nineteenth century came to an end, dissatisfaction with the method, content, and nature of education offered by national schools was being discussed in many areas. Child-centred educationalists were questioning changes in educational philosophy, specifically challenging traditional approaches to primary schooling. The child-centred movement, espoused in the works of Froebel, Pestalozzi, and Rousseau, maintained the disposition of the child was being neglected in schools and demanded a fundamental overhaul with the needs, nature, and interests of the child at the forefront of the school teaching structure. Rousseau’s argument on curriculum-centred theory claims the child-centred philosophy accommodates learning by discovery and caretaking in addition to educating (Rousseau, 1948). His philosophy is embedded in Aistear (2009), the whole child perspective, and the Primary School Curriculum (1999) acknowledges the significance of emotional development for children’s school success. The focus on experiential learning and providing experiences to foster children’s natural development was further highlighted by Pestalozzi and Froebel (Flanagan 2006).

The revised programme for national schools was instantiated in September 1900 and the significance of infant education highlighted. Substantial advancements were then made in infant education, which until then had been a largely ignored feature in Irish education. The philosophy underpinning the curriculum had an impact on attitudes to teacher education, methodologies, content, and the notion of child involvement in the curriculum.

The late 1960's saw the grounding for a new curriculum for national schools which became official policy in 1971. The principles and content and format of *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971) was in militant contrast to that which had previously existed. A re-evaluation of the PSC was carried out with the intention of bringing school educational attitudes in line with contemporary philosophies on the disposition of children and their learning needs. The 1971 curriculum was founded on several principles; a few with notable significance. One such principle acknowledged that opportunities should be made available for young children's development through discovery and exploration. Moreover, it affirmed that this style of learning should integrate the application of verbal discussion, tangible materials, and first-hand experience of the topic. The PSC aspired to offer a broad learning experience and promoted a range of methodologies to learning and teaching which provided for the diverse requirements of children. The PSC was intended to develop the child in all aspects of his or her life; moral, spiritual, cognitive, imaginative, emotional, physical, aesthetic, and social. Moreover, in 1999 as a result of progress in Irish society, social developments, and economic status, a new curriculum was developed which ringfenced early childhood education as one of 14 critical concerns in the context of Irish primary education.

There has been considerable educational research evidence to demonstrate 1999 to 2018 has seen the most productive Irish education period in relation to developing ECCE policies, frameworks, and requirements which are critical to quality discourse. Indeed, since the introduction of the PSC (1971), there has also been a noticeable transition from the didactic methodologies of 1948 towards play-based and heuristic methodologies. While the PSC was a welcome change from didactic methodologies, it focused on the need for an ever-greater emphasis on non-didactic methods and active teaching. Based on pertinent documents Figure 3 illustrates the development of infant education in Ireland which led to the early childhood education provision in place in Irish primary schools today:

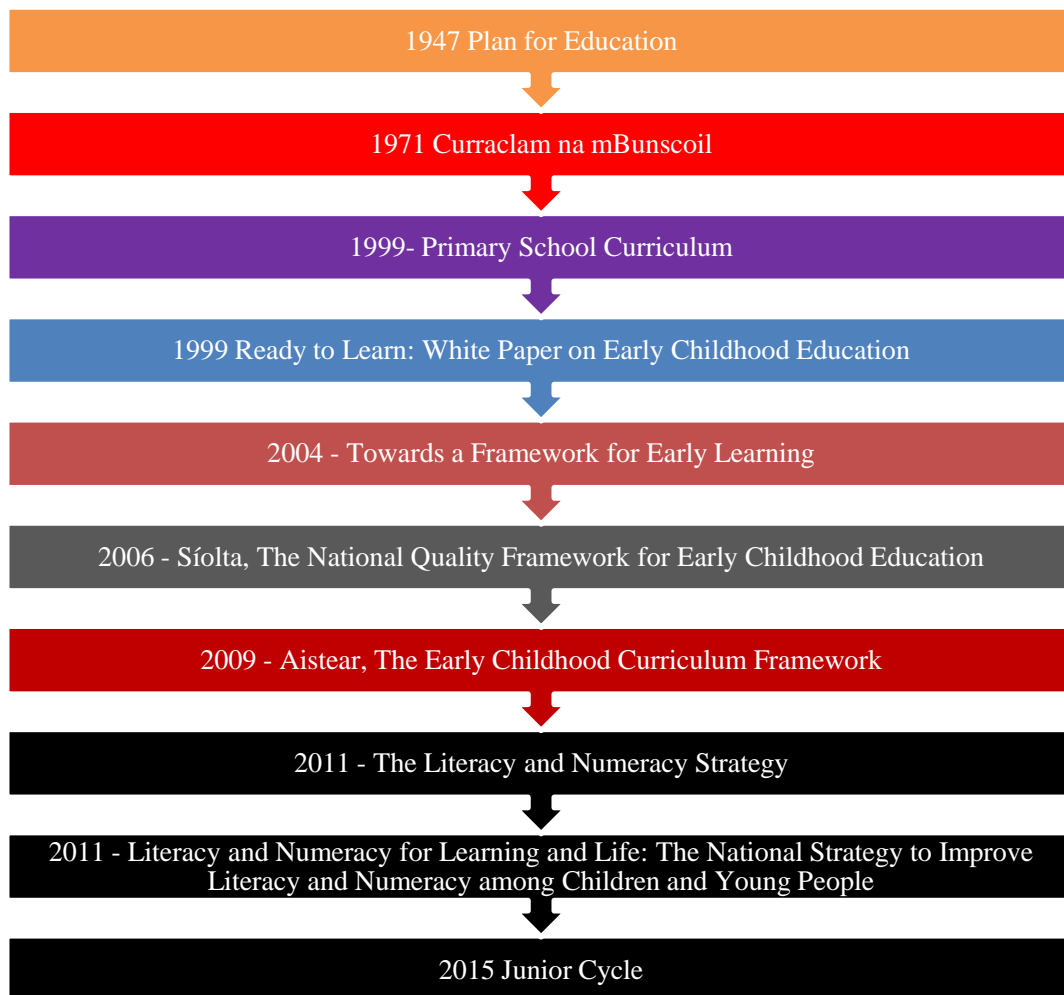


Figure 3: Timeline of Development of Early Childhood Education Policy in Ireland

2.5 PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM 1999 AND AISTEAR 2009

To fully explain why the integration of Aistear with the PSC has been less than straightforward, both must be examined theoretically to identify similarities and divergences between the documents.

2.5.1 PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM 1999

The 1999 PSC was the first complete modification of the curriculum since 1971. This curriculum was developed throughout the years where the impact of contemporary theorists consisting of Piaget, Dewey, and Vygotsky were apparent (NCCA, 1999). The revised 1999 curriculum rested on three broad aims of primary education: namely, 1) to nurture each child's capacity to the full; 2) to foster a passion of learning; and 3) to encourage children to develop abilities throughout their lives.

The PSC aspires to provide a range of learning experiences and promotes a range of approaches to learning and teaching that provide for the distinct requirements of individual children (NCCA, 2009). The primary curriculum is designed to nurture the child in all dimensions of life: spiritual; moral; cognitive; emotional; imaginative; aesthetic; social; and physical. The objective of the curriculum is to endow children with the self-assurance to meet the demands of both present and future life. Children's education in Ireland falls under the auspices of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). Primary education is made up of an eight-year process consisting of junior infants, senior infants, and First to Sixth classes. The PSC contains eleven subjects which are grouped together in seven areas consisting of mathematics, arts education (visual, music and drama), physical education, language (Gaeilge and English), social, environmental, and scientific education (history, geography, and science), religious education, and social, personal, and health education (ibid, 1999).

The infant curriculum is designed for children aged four to six years and consists of six curriculum areas; language, mathematics, social, environmental and scientific education (SESE), art education, physical education, and social, personal, and health education (SPHE). This curriculum acknowledges the integrity of the child's life and aspires to "cater for his/her needs and potential as they evolve day by day" (DES, 1999, p.6). The PSC states the infant curriculum consists of natural occurrences while also highlighting the significance of play for young children's learning needs (NCCA, 1999). It further underscores the "crucial importance of the early years in the child's developmental experience" (ibid, p.30) and asserts that early childhood education is fundamental to primary education. The infant curriculum is derived from principles of learning and teaching which acknowledge the consequences of what the child discovers and learns. Consequently, the curriculum stipulates not only the subject matter to be learned and results to be accomplished, but also identifies an extensive variety of teaching styles of teaching (DES, 1999). The ongoing review, reform, and development of curriculum are essential to promote continued reflection on teachers' methods and content and to make sure they stay apace of broader societal developments.

Many successes are associated with the 1999 curriculum. These involve children's enjoyment of learning, an augmented use of active methodologies, continued assistance for children with additional needs, and enhanced achievement levels in reading, science and mathematics science as confirmed in national and international assessments. Nevertheless barriers too have been recognised, for example, curriculum overload, the challenge of

sustaining all children as learners, and the problems of assessment and reporting on children's learning.

There have also been requests for the primary curriculum to focus on greater awareness to existing areas for instance wellbeing (incorporating Social, Personal and Health Education, and Physical Education). Additionally, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People* (2011) outlined a curriculum reform agenda which initiated the development of the new Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga Bunscoile and to develop a new mathematics curriculum. In addition, the provision of two years of widespread preschool education, the publication of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) and the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) have pointed to changes in what children encounter prior to beginning primary school and in what and how they discover on departing primary school. The Irish education system and children themselves are fashioned by diverse experiences of family life, diverse beliefs and perspectives, different cultures and different abilities and needs. As a result, schools and teachers encounter an increasing challenge to acknowledge and react to this diversity in a manner that allows all children to learn and make headway.

2.5.2 AISTEAR 2009: THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

Aistear, meaning 'journey', is based on the New Zealand Early Years Curriculum, known as *Te Whariki* (1996). As such, it is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland, and outlines a set of shared principles and themes to guide whichever curriculum is in place in the ECCE setting. Aistear is influenced by both Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory and Piaget's cognitive development theory. Aistear explains the styles of learning fundamental for children and delineates how they can be provided in the diverse settings of day care, childminding, sessional services, and infant classes in primary schools. Since the overarching concern of Aistear is the holistic development of the child, it focuses on offering pertinent and stimulating experiences for children and concentrates on the enhancement of attitudes, learning dispositions, and values.

The function of Aistear is to provide information for infant teachers to assist, plan, and deliver enjoyable and stimulating 'learning experiences' in order that all children can "grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships" (NCCA, 2009, p.6). The objective of Aistear is recognising the various forms of learning (attitudes,

dispositions, skills values, understanding, and knowledge) which are significant to children in their early years, and proposes different methods to cultivate them in children. Aistear is founded on twelve principles organised into three groups: *Children and their lives in early childhood*; *Children's connections with others*; and *How children learn and develop* (NCCA, 2009, p.7). Aistear further outlines its core aims and learning goals through four interrelated themes: *Well-being*, *Communication*; *Exploring and thinking*; and *Identity and belonging* (NCCA, 2009, p.13). Guiding principles offer assistance when implementing Aistear's aims and learning goals while engaging with children (Appendix 13). "Aistear recognises that there are many roads that can lead to the same destination and helps to support children's learning in a safe but challenging, stimulating and caring environment" (Donohoe and Gaynor, 2011, p.14).

Aistear is an inquiry-based curriculum framework which utilises children's and teachers' curiosity, inquiries, and knowledge as a basis to process curriculum planning by building partnership between parents and practitioners, learning and developing through interactions and play, and encouraging learning and development (NCCA, 2015).

2.5.3 COMPARING THE PSC WITH AISTEAR

The introduction of Aistear sheds considerable light on the work of teachers in junior and senior classes of primary school (Moloney, 2011). Aistear enables teachers to develop their planning by incorporating collaboration with parents, pedagogy, well-being, development, and learning of the child through play. It is developed from a combination of general underpinning values that mark early childhood as a unique phase in a child's life. Aistear consists of the significance of equilibrium between adult-led and child-led activities. Rather than compartmentalising the areas of learning into physical, intellectual, emotional, language and social skills, it holds all learning to be connected and motivated by the objectives and goals of childhood. Aistear assumes that children discover different things simultaneously. What they discover is related to where, how, and with whom they discover (NCCA, 2009). This reflects the holistic disposition of young children's development and learning wherein every element of learning is interdependent and interconnected. In addition, each theme links with all the developmental areas and subjects within the infant curriculum in primary schools.

By comparison, each subject in the PSC was founded on a set of aims and broad objectives particular to that subject. Informed by the aims and objectives, children's learning is by way of a succession of strands. Each strand is consequently separated into a quantity of strand units. The number of strands, strand units, and content objectives, varies from subject to subject. As with Aistear, the curriculum offers reminders and suggestions for learning experiences for children. In advocating teachers' application of integration in their classroom teaching, the curriculum gives exemplars of theme-based components of work across different subjects. This method of integration entails a teacher implementing a theme deriving from children's interests or directly from the curriculum. Aistear on the other hand does not give this level of support. Aistear offers a curriculum framework for holistic development and learning encouraged by an adult who produces a significant play environment, networks with children when appropriate, co-constructs learning by encouragement, suggestion, demonstration and questioning, and observes and assesses both the children and the activity to update future planning. Aistear accentuates the importance of adults in supporting the child's well-being, learning, and development. The scaffolding of children's early learning and development by capable, knowledgeable, and competent adults is a further fundamental principle on which Aistear is founded.

A direct comparison of Aistear and PSC guidelines illuminated a number of similarities and differences. Both sets of guidelines stress adult-child interactions by offering realistic data on several approaches which the teacher could use in his/her classroom with children. Furthermore, Aistear offers these approaches completely in an early childhood setting. In the PSC, particular consideration is focused on adult-child communication at infant level in selected areas of learning; such as, for instance, in assisting emergent reading. Aistear focuses on present-day learning and for future learning. It is important to note differences between the PSC and Aistear because the role of the teacher varies between what could be considered as teacher-intensive (PSC) and teacher-initiated activities (Aistear). Table1 outlines the purpose, type of audience, settings, and age profile of children in relation to both the PSC and Aistear:

Document	Purpose	Children	Settings	Audience
Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework	To ensure children to grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with	0-6 years	All early years settings including children's own homes	Parents and practitioners Other professionals who work with children and their families

	others			
Document	Purpose	Children	Settings	Audience
Primary School Curriculum	To enable children to meet, with self-confidence and assurance the demands of life, both now and in the future (Introduction, p.6)	4-6 years	Junior and senior infant classes in mainstream and special primary schools	Primary school teachers who work with junior and senior infants. This includes class, learning support, language, and resource teachers

TABLE 1: PURPOSE, AUDIENCE, SETTINGS AND CHILDREN (NCCA, 2009, p.5)

The above table highlights the overlap between the PSC and Aistear for four to six year olds and serves to highlight the gap that has opened up concepts of best practice for early years' education. The extensive nature of the PSC and the guidelines that accompanied it had the effect of reinforcing a more subject-based approach at the expense of cultivating the dispositions for learning that we now see articulated in the Aistear framework and in the underpinning framework for Junior Cycle.

Aistear and the PSC confirm assessment as an approach concerning several activities: for instance gathering data; interpreting; sharing; documenting; and applying this data for the children's benefit.

Aistear is based on the links between learning, reviewing, assessing, and planning. It includes a suite of guidelines which foreground assessment throughout early childhood in terms of its objective, approaches, and uses. Aistear deems assessment to be crucial to ensuring children receive pertinent and valuable experiences to develop in their learning:

“Relevant and meaningful experiences make learning more enjoyable and positive for children. On-going assessment of what children do, say and make, and reflection on these experiences helps practitioners to plan more developmentally appropriate and meaningful learning experiences for children. This also enables them to improve their practice. Assessment is about building a picture of children's individual strengths, interests, abilities, and needs and using this to support and plan for their future learning and development” (NCCA, 2009, p.11).

The PSC similarly privileges assessment of children's development and learning, “Assessment is integral to all areas of the curriculum and it encompasses the diverse aspects of learning: the cognitive, the creative, the affective, the physical and the social. In addition to the products of learning, the strategies, procedures and stages in the process of learning are assessed” (Introduction, 1999, p.18). The PSC explains that assessment is significant when encouraging children's learning as it yields data which teachers can utilise to encourage

learning for children at infant level to be even more appealing and attractive. When, subsequent to a review of the PSC, teachers asked for additional information and support for their assessment practice, the NCCA developed the resource, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools (2007)*. This was especially important in relation to the interaction connecting Aistear and the PSC. The guidelines for primary schools offer realistic data for teachers employing assessment as a component of daily interactions in classrooms, the majority of which centred on children from First to Sixth classes. The lack of information on applying assessment to junior and senior infants is dealt with in the Aistear guidelines. Both sets of assessment guidelines act as significant landmarks for developing a continuous assessment practice from four to twelve years. Partnership with parents, family, and community is a main principle of Aistear: “Parents are the most important people in children’s lives. The care and education that children receive from their parents and family, especially during their early months and years, greatly influence their overall development. Extended family and community also have important roles to play” (NCCA, 2009, p.9). Demonstrating how this principle can be turned into practice, Aistear presents guidelines on approaches to foster partnerships with parents and families. The curriculum similarly emphasises the responsibility of parents in their children’s education: “Parents are the child’s primary educators, and the life of the home is the most potent factor in his or her development during the primary school years. Close co-operation between the home and the school is essential, therefore, if children are to receive the maximum benefit from the curriculum” (Introduction, 1999, p.21).

Aistear facilitates the adult to position play and active learning at the centre of the infant curriculum. Aistear has a collection of guiding principles on learning through play whereas the PSC provides some degree of attention to this element of practice. Aistear supports the critical role of play in children’s early learning. This is apparent in the guiding principles which provide information and ideas to assist adults to develop different types of play to be exercised in the classrooms. Aistear identifies that “Much of children’s early learning and development takes place through play and hands-on experiences. Through these, children explore social, physical and imaginary worlds. These experiences help them to manage their feelings, develop as thinkers and language users, develop socially, be creative and imaginative, and lay the foundations for becoming effective communicators and learners” (Principles and Themes, 2009, p. 11).

The curriculum supports learning by doing and states that the “child should be an active agent in his or her own learning” (Introduction, 1999, p.14). It further emphasises the consequence of play for allowing young children to be active in their learning: “The curriculum for infants ...is, in the first place, based on the uniqueness of the child and the particular needs of individual children at this stage of development. The informality of the learning experience inherent in it, and the emphasis it gives to the element of play, are particularly suited to the learning needs of young children” (ibid, p. 30).

When examining a variety of teaching styles and methods to be exercised in infant classrooms, the curriculum guidelines are less clear play. Consequently, the curriculum provides relatively few examples of how play can be utilised in infant classes to encourage young children’s development and learning. This may be due to the fact the PSC encourages children’s development and learning from four to twelve years as opposed to children aged four to six years. At the same time, alterations in family configurations and social behaviours have resulted in a reduced amount of time for play in the home; highlighting still further the importance of play occasions in out-of-home locations. Power (2000 cited in BTHA, 2011) claims that parents impart powerful agency when playing with children. “When parents play with infants and young children, the complexity of children’s behaviour increases substantially both in the duration of the social interactions and in the developmental level of children’s social behaviour” (Power, 2000, pp.362-375).

In summary, it is imperative to recognise that the 1999 PSC is the main curriculum (a syllabus), Aistear is a curriculum framework (an aid). All curriculum styles reflect a set of values and beliefs concerning the developmental and educational requirements of the child in the here and now and in the future, while remaining mindful of the extensive requirements of society at that moment (Wood and Attfield, 2005). The *White Paper on Education (1999a)* defines a curriculum as the subject matter, formation, and procedure of teaching and learning, which the school makes available in keeping with its educational aims and values. Aistear defines a curriculum as “all the experiences, formal and informal, planned and unplanned in the indoor and outdoor environment, which contribute to children’s learning and development” (Principles and Themes, 2009, p.54). Aistear describes a framework as an aid which assists adults in building a curriculum for children in their classroom (NCCA, 2009). In short; the PSC is subject-based and delineates out the content of children’s learning

whereas Aistear conversely proposes a holistic, practice-based approach which can be utilised to develop further child-centred attitudes to learning and teaching (Gray and Ryan, 2016).

2.5.4 IMPLEMENTING AISTEAR WITH THE INFANT CURRICULUM

The debate concerning Aistear and its implementation in infant classrooms has been somewhat restricted until now. Finding the balance between delivering the curriculum and fulfilling the learning requirements of children can be exceptionally challenging (Moyles and Worthington, 2011), particularly since the approach required to educate children in infant classes is radically different to that used to educate their senior primary counterparts (O'Connor and Angus, 2012). Research and curriculum guidance suggest that a didactic attitude is inappropriate in all primary schools and that learning and teaching during play in the early years is more favourable and valuable to young children (Walsh *et al.*, 2011; Stephen, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford, 2002). In fact, Aistear is intrinsic to facilitating this play-based attitude to learning in the infant classroom.

The literacy and numeracy strategy recommends that children should receive early childhood education through a “broad, holistic and interconnected programme of activities” (DES, 2011a, p.47). Implementing the curriculum requires teachers to link key knowledge, skills, and attitudes from a selection of curricular areas which allow children to develop in a holistic and systematic way (Kysilka, 1998). The Curriculum of Excellence in Scotland advocates that children utilise the skills developed in one curricular area and apply them in a cross-curricular manner during play. There are many possibilities for teachers to extend higher-order thinking skills and to support children to contemplate more deeply by implementing the curriculum through play. Employing role-play could cultivate creativity, imagination, social capabilities, and numeracy and literacy. These skills are incorporated in several curricular areas, such as Mathematics, S.P.H.E, English, Drama, Visual Arts and Physical Education. Play is a beneficial tool to teach several curricular areas concurrently, giving children an exceptional beginning to ‘life-long learning’ (Rogers *et al.*, 2008).

Discovering a way to implement Aistear with the PSC harmoniously requires close attention so as to support the classroom teaching of infant teachers. One approach is to engage with Aistear as an amending initiative which complements the infant primary curriculum. One of the main objectives of the PSC is to advocate the uniqueness of the child: this is also one of Aistear’s main educative pillars. Aistear and the PSC together celebrate

diversity and support equality. Both are established on the principle of the integration of learning and the assumption that children do not learn in isolation but in a holistic, connected, and active way. Relationships and the function of the family are perceived as critical in both documents. Even as play is established as a primary technique for learning in both the PSC and Aistear within the infant classroom, the position of play and informal learning has not always been evident (Hayes, 2004; Murphy, 2004). A new language curriculum in English and Irish has been developed and the principles and themes steering Aistear have impacted this curriculum (NCCA, 2016; DCYA, 2013; O'Connor and Angus, 2012).

It is evident that children's learning can benefit in a play-learning setting up to the age of six years. Nevertheless, didactic teaching techniques persist in the infant classroom, despite little proof supporting the advantages of an early formal start (Gray and Ryan, 2016; O'Connor and Angus, 2012; Alexander, 2009). Aistear can help to foster a real feeling of continuity for children in infant primary school classrooms (Barnardos and Start Strong, 2012). In their literacy and numeracy learning for life strategy the DES assert that "After their pre-school year, most children between the ages of four and six years will continue their early childhood care and education within infant classes in primary schools. The principles that inform the Aistear curriculum framework will help shape the curriculum for these classes... As the curriculum for infant classes is revised to reflect the emphasis in Aistear on the child's well-being, ability to communicate, explore and think, the changes will give rise to professional development needs among teachers working with this age-group" (DES, 2011a, p.28).

A second approach to a blanket implementation of Aistear in infant education could help less stressful transitions for children and enhance consistency of approach for the early years' by involving pre-schools and primary schools (Barnardos and Start Strong, 2012). There are considerable benefits to having a shared curriculum framework steering teachers across pre-school and infant classrooms as this results in infant classrooms becoming increasingly receptive to children's requirements and wellbeing as learners. Adjustments in philosophies and progression of policies regarding play-based pedagogy in infant classrooms signifies the capacity of curriculum developments in the influencing learning and teaching that takes place in the classroom, will depend on the understanding and expertise of the teacher concerning play (Hunter and Walsh 2014; Taylor *et al.*, 2004).

The NCCA published the principles and themes of Aistear in hardcopy and developed an online toolkit for infant teachers in the exercise of Aistear in their classroom (Uí Chadhlá, 2014; DCYA, 2013). A partnership connecting the NCCA and Association of Teachers' Education Centres in Ireland (ATECI) also provided gave primary school teacher tuition in Aistear through the Aistear Tutor Initiative (Uí Chadhlá, 2014). A thorough understanding of the theoretical and functional elements of play is essential to promote a playful attitude to learning in the infant classroom. Moreover, it is fundamental that infant teachers not undervalue the learning episodes children acquire through informal play-based attitudes (McGuinness, 2014; Pickett, 2005; Taylor *et al.*, 2004). In reality, much evidence is coming to light which purports infant teachers feel torn between the revised play-based attitudes, the demands of the curriculum, and parental expectations (Gray and Ryan, 2016; Lynch, 2015).

2.6 THE ROLE OF THE INFANT TEACHER

Current literature highlights the role of the teacher during play-based pedagogy (Ackesjö, 2013a; Petriwskyj, 2013; Dockett and Perry, 2007). Teachers have the opportunity to manipulate the environment positively or negatively. Developing theories from research propose that a key contributing factor in children's difficulties in adjustment and subsequent achievement in school is the discontinuity in pedagogy among settings (Petriwskyj, 2013, 2005; Grieshaber, 2009). Thus, teachers' pedagogical philosophy and understandings about how they implement play-based pedagogy are fundamental to comprehending pedagogic continuity across the transition procedure.

Play cannot be implemented in early years' education without the participation of the teacher. Vygotsky (1978) indicated that the adult plays a substantial role in the growth of children during play. For children's development, it is crucial that teachers are conscious of what the DES has identified as a "diversity of curriculum practices" (2011a, p.48). As part of this development, literacy and numeracy are at the forefront: so much so, that the literacy and numeracy strategy introduced by the DES in 2011 attempts to develop standards (DES, 2011a). Specifically, the strategy intends to prioritise play and child-centred activities and aspires to make use of teaching and learning objectives supported in Aistear to advance literacy and numeracy outcomes (DES, 2011a). This signals the need for teachers to implement the key concepts of the Aistear curriculum framework within infant classes. However, researchers have identified several barriers for literacy and numeracy development

in the primary years. Barriers relative to content and implementation of the primary curriculum have been highlighted so as to assist the improvement to the quality of literacy and numeracy in primary schools. To overcome these barriers, teachers should be provided with a transparent paradigm of learning outcomes anticipated for children in English and Irish at all levels of the primary years. This could be further enhanced with examples of children's work and learning to explicitly demonstrate what these learning outcomes signify in practice (DES, 2011a).

The centrality of the teacher role is underlined in both curriculum documents. This multifaceted and complicated role can comprise countless different characteristics. The teacher has a strategic role in planning for play, together with using a play-based method within adult and child initiated learning experiences. In addition, employing this type of method creates the circumstances for integrating the predictable learning outcomes with the unforeseen outcomes which can arise with children. One of the key dissimilarities between the two documents is that the PSC increases the teachers' role to a larger degree than the child's, relative to guiding learning. Another role of the teacher is to continue and sustain a child's education which has by now begun at home and within the community (Moyle, 2012). The role of teachers in infant classrooms should be to act as facilitators who steer and scaffold children's learning.

This should take place throughout active learning and guide the adult away from didactic teaching, since the children exercise choice and independence in their play-based activities (ibid, 2011). Nonetheless the relationship between a teacher and a child is complicated, as they must be both engaged in the learning process, be attuned to each other's viewpoints, and work concurrently with each other (Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008). Play requires a certain degree of participation from the adult to guarantee 'deep-level learning' is taking place during the play. The teacher's responsibility is to respond to learner cues and to help when needed, with the aim of transferring control to the learner as the learner's capacity increases. Playful interactions with children also permit the teacher to assist learning by modelling, instructing, and questioning (Pickett, 2005). In summary, children discover from their environments and the role of the adult in children's play is crucial.

Research studies, for example those of Hedges and Cullen (2012) in New Zealand and Edwards *et al* (2012) in Australia, refer to the complications inherent in endeavouring to modify teachers' understandings and practices concerning play-based pedagogy. In the

United States, Johnson *et al* (2005) also observed obstacles to educational play-based pedagogy due to teachers' understanding that play-based pedagogy is totally different from teaching and educational education. Likewise, Haney and Bissonnette (2011) examined teachers' understanding in the United States with reference to their use of play in encouraging social, emotional, and cognitive abilities, highlighting what they believed play to be significant for the best childhood development. Over the past two decades in the United States, there is a growing practitioner worry that kindergarten classrooms are becoming increasingly instructive; hindering play and the development of social skills.

Adults play a considerable role in play by expanding children's "language, thinking and understandings" and arousing their "curiosity, imagination and creativity" (Hayes, 2012, p.13). The role of the teacher involves spending time learning about various roles and how they support an emergent play-based curriculum. One of the twelve principles of Aistear is the adult's role in the child connecting with others (NCCA, 2009). The adult's role in play should "respect the flow and spirit of the play" (Wood and Attfield, 2005, p.183). The best teachers employ a combination of pedagogical styles, including extending, scaffolding, discussing, and monitoring, as well as direct instruction (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004). These styles enhance a play setting where the child is contented, participating, and completely engaged.

Instead of an environment where the teacher endeavours to control the play, a compassionate environment that allows rich play to flourish and develop the child's complete learning experience is favoured (Logue and Detour, 2011; Pickett, 2005; Dunkin and Hanna, 2001). The opposite approach is clearly unwelcome, as all too often play can be something "left to the children, whilst teachers get on with the important business of getting them through the curriculum" (Moyes and Worthington, 2011, p3). During Aistear in infant classrooms, teachers need to organise and timetable the play for children, and prepare and arrange the classroom around a theme with the required resources (Keane, 2014).

Assessment is heavily intertwined with teaching. However, teachers seem to have complicatedness with assessment in a play-based curriculum, perhaps there are lots of difficulties connected with early learning which have implications for assessment and learning (McGuinness, 2014; Dunphy, 2008; Wood and Attfield, 2005). Any attempt to stimulate play and playful teaching methods in schools clearly rests on better knowledge of both theoretical and empirical understandings of this topic. Both Aistear and the infant PSC

accentuate the critical role the adult plays in improving and enhancing children's development and learning. Nonetheless, the adult-child relationship varies between Aistear and the PSC. Aistear emphasises the value of mutual relationships between adult and child:

“During early childhood it is important that children have opportunities to lead learning through self-initiated and self-directed learning, and to be involved in decisions about what they do. At other times, the adult leads through planned and guided activities and increases or lessens the amount and type of support as children grow in confidence and competence” (NCCA, Guidelines for Good Practice, 2009, p.28).

In contrast, the PSC places more emphasis on the teachers' role rather than the child's role in guiding learning through which the adult recognises “particular stages of development in the child's understanding and then choose the sequence of activities that will be most effective in advancing the child's learning” (NCCA, 1999, p.15). Identifying these dissimilarities, it is important to note that much has been identified regarding how children develop and learn in early childhood since the PSC was developed. An emergent curriculum implies that teachers considerably prepare the environment, presenting numerous observable choices derived from children's abilities and needs. Furthermore, teachers exercising an emergent curriculum are urged to use reflective practice, this allowing adequate time to think and take action through their observations of children. This curriculum is a developmentally appropriate method for setting up the environment for children's learning in ECCE.

This method allows teachers achieve better awareness of every child's personal requirements, and make or modify curriculum to suit a specific child as necessary.

Project work is another element that effectively practices emergent curriculum. Projects encourage children to gain knowledge of a subject in greater detail over a period of days or weeks and can consist of small groups or the complete class. The Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss 2005) is a multi-method device for encouraging children's participation which demonstrates how children can allocate a voice to their ideas and contribute to their development (Moss, 2008). This process uses a range of visual and verbal participatory methodological devices incorporating outings, interviewing children, conferencing, cameras and map-making. They encounter hands-on experiences, personal reflection, and learning and teaching interactive procedures.

Being competent to make choices is a crucial feature during children's discovery as it guarantees learning is synchronised with what children would like to perform and accomplish and supports active learning by organising play events which are anchored in children's real

experiences. Vygotsky (1978) placed emphasis on the significance of the function of adults involved in children's play and learning. He maintained that understanding the educational importance and progression of children's play mainly relies on the leadership of adults. Vygotsky's view on education was that adults should adopt operational roles during children's play if the learning needs are to be developed. Furthermore, teaching by adults and peers during children's play by way of verbal leadership, modelling, imaginative play, and thematic fantasy instruction, can assist the quantity and intricacy of children's play and enhance their cognitive, language, and social skills. Teachers therefore need to know which roles they should play and how to interact with children to support their learning and development (Wood and Attfield, 2005, p.97). Nonetheless, Wood maintained that although play-based pedagogy is supported in schools, infant teachers still have difficulties with their role in play.

Vygotsky's theories clearly elucidate the importance of adult roles in structuring infant play. According to Vygotsky (1976) play comprises of any activity that does not try to create expected results or transform infants' desire according to external rules. Therefore, play works as an environment wherein children take risks when exploring, creating, and solving.

In addition, teachers' every day experiences with individual children manipulate their thoughts concerning how to organise play and how to react to children's requirements through play. As a result, teachers' understandings are reciprocally influential and progressively evolve. From this standpoint, teaching through play is not merely about abilities, methods, or approaches, but is the personification of teachers' understandings, experiences, and constructs of infants play, teaching, and learning (Cassidy and Lawrence, 2000). The exact role of the adult in teaching during play is to a great extent emphasised by Kennedy and Stonehouse (2012). Integrated teaching and learning methods blend learning and guided play, adult-led learning and child-directed play and learning. How a teacher views play is rooted in his/her academic underpinning and this reflects the position play-based pedagogy is given in the classroom. Play is a crucial part of children's lives and several of their activities are characterised by play. Consequently, it is important for teachers to consider how they connect with play, given that this is articulated through their teaching methods. Therefore, it is pertinent and interesting to research how infant teachers portray play and its significance in school and to children's learning. Lindon (2001) observed that frequently teachers were not confident of the meaning they give children about play. She

argues that teachers generally use play as a motivation for having finished prescribed work. Moreover, teachers can be stretched by the burden of inspection regimes and learning goals and frequently resort to formal teaching methods as a result of lack of confidence in their own abilities (Pugh and Duffy, 2009). The disparities between theory and practice are a glaring weakness when discussing play in early childhood settings.

One of the barriers faced by practising infant teachers is the idea that play does not have defined consequences. This presents a problem when trying to implement play as a learning means in the classroom. Fisher (2002) contends that infant teachers in the United Kingdom have acknowledged the concepts, skills, and comprehension that children should reach by the age of five. With this information, there is a genuine concern that if infant teachers do not prepare for and embrace the curriculum in a structured manner, children will not attain all their early learning goals. The role of teachers, however, is to be observant and note the learning that is happening during play in the classroom. Another challenge identified saw teachers too preoccupied with the desire to complete the curriculum (Anning, Cullen and Fler, 2008). This could be further problematised if play-based pedagogy was implemented for teaching and learning activities. Children learn from their environments and undoubtedly the role of the adult in children's play is an important and complex one. Developing these skills in the early years is vital as research proposes they can have an influence on future development and later accomplishment in school, work, and life (Start Strong, 2010).

2.7 TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY

Understanding is recognised as a vital notion to comprehend human conduct and is considered a psychological condition which comprises of feelings and beliefs. People's understandings regarding their occupation impact their teaching. Marchant (1992) states the length of experience is a factor impacting teacher understandings regarding their occupation. Alyhazo *et al* (2003) discovered that women have more optimistic understanding than male teachers. Since understandings fluctuate from culture to culture, endeavouring to imitate teaching and learning approaches from other societies without attempting to fit into local circumstances may not be successful (Derebssa, 2006). The perception of teachers comes to the forefront as they deliberate on the verbal communication they employ in their teaching. Consciously or unconsciously, teachers' understandings have a significant role in language's

expansion or decay (Baker, 1988). Three sets of understandings appear necessary to teaching practice: namely, understandings concerning teaching; knowledge; and students' aptitude. There are also numerous aspects and circumstances that impact the development of understandings. These consist of parental attitudes, type of schooling, and the attitude of teachers, friends and siblings. Curriculum documents further influence teachers' understandings of pedagogical practice and, as such, their comprehension may change the context in which children learn (Synodi, 2010).

People-oriented teachers benefit from their interactions with students and experience constructive understandings concerning them. On the other hand, introvert teachers may prefer to reduce social interactions with students and build only partial understandings of them. Teachers' understandings can influence teacher-student relations. Nevertheless, research demonstrates that even though teachers understand the importance of play in children's development and learning, accomplishing high calibre play in reality continues to be a permanent challenge across diverse cultural and social contexts (Rogers and Evans, 2008; Wood and Bennett, 2001; Keating, 2000). There are systematic conflicts between the rhetoric and reality of play within schools.

Researchers have established that although the advantages are acknowledged, infant teachers do not always understand how to plan for play, or to interpret and support play (Moyle *et al.*, 2002).

The deficiency of teacher knowledge and skill through the lack of adequate training has been identified in the preceding topic and it is clear from Murphy (2004), that this shortage of knowledge and skill has had adverse consequences for teachers' understandings regarding play. Training and professional development can encourage teachers to accept change, giving them the self-assurance and aptitude to enhance their classroom practice. These teachers' understandings regarding play are constructive and encouraging because they realise the procedure involved in play and its developmental suitability for young children. Similarly Bret *et al* (2002) refer to the positive understandings teachers had regarding play. Most of the teachers in this study had availed of ECCE training courses and were certified in either 'early childhood education', pre-kindergarten and primary education' or 'early childhood special education'; credentials which obliged them to do assignments based on early childhood education and childhood development (Bret *et al.*, 2002, p.76).

It may be assumed that in completing these courses teachers were knowledgeable of the literature on the benefits of play. These teachers saw play as an important methodology in the classroom due to its developmental appropriate nature. They believed play was critical to the development of the child. It was also affirmed that the importance of play to the teachers for the planning, preparation, and implementation of the curriculum in early childhood education. Nonetheless, Frost (2005) observed that children perceived differences between play and work. Wood and Attfield (2005) discovered that children relate work with teacher-directed tasks and a number of tasks which are compulsory to sitting still. When children participate in tasks by way of teacher directions, children thought of it as work; however when children are selecting and directing their tasks voluntarily, they think about it as play (Holmes, 1999). The enjoyment based on the activity is not an indicator of the difference between work and play (Cooney, *et al.*, 2000). The same study observed that teachers and children blurred the boundaries between work and play. They articulated problems when classifying their everyday classroom activities as work or play. Apparently work and play are indistinct from their viewpoints. Research confirms that inconsistencies are present in the understandings of play in diverse societies (Roopnarine, 2011). Wu and Rao (2011) compared Chinese and German infant teachers' views of learning, play, and children's play manners. They discovered that German teachers characterise directed activities and free play straightforwardly. The teachers describe free play as children's self-learning devoid of teachers' interrupting. While an awareness of the significance of play differs somewhat across ethnic groupings in Canada, United States, Australian and European cultures which are becoming more and more diverse from the research carried out in those countries, it appears that adults from European and European-heritage cultural group strongly endorse the belief that play assumes a significant role in children's intellectual and social development. Conversely, adults from non-European-heritage cultures demonstrated "the least favourable attitudes towards play" (Roopnarine, 2011, p.22).

By re-examining the important literature, play surfaced as a necessary activity of infant education which was hugely significant to children's psychological, physical, emotional, cognitive, social development, well-being, and holistic development of the child. Teachers' understandings of the value and meaning of play for children's development is critical, as there is "a strong relationship between teachers' educational beliefs and their planning, instructional decisions and classroom practices" (Pajares, 1992, p.326). Since both teachers and children are components of how the classroom environment is maintained this

not only provides a sense of belonging, but instils children with respect for their environment. Communication allows for ideas to be formed and also helps design a framework for learning and thinking that assists learning. When children and teachers are actively involved in learning they are developing mental structures that help to think and move on; these are called “schemas” (Athey, 1990). Infant teachers play a pivotal role in children’s learning by establishing an environment and situations to encourage their participation. When teachers absorb children in active learning they become sympathetic towards each child, while gathering information regarding what is already familiar to the child. Teachers’ understandings of play may influence the implementation of play and impact children’s development and learning in reality. Play can be employed as a way of assisting literacy in infant classrooms in primary schools (Pickett, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Numerous Vygotsky scholars have perceived play as possessing an outstanding influence over the progression of literacy by manipulating “oral language, metalinguistic awareness and the child’s imagination” (Einarsdóttir, 2014, p.96). Play includes many essential contexts that can assist literacy and numeracy progression in children, providing them the occasion to motivate language development (Lukie, *et al.*, 2014; Pickett, 2005; Moyles, 1989).

When children play they are offered the chance to exercise numerous forms of language to convey themselves while also obtaining essential social skills.

Play inheres the function of sorting emotional issues in children (Moyles, 1989). For instance, psychoanalysts, Elanie Klein and Anna Freud Child, held that play’s purpose was one of “emotional expression and release”, while Susan Issacs deemed play necessary for the healthy emotional development of children. Play can have a vast function in supporting children create and maintain companionships over time where children work in partnership with each other (Dunn, 1993). It is obvious that play has numerous advantages for children’s social, emotional, cognitive development, in addition to supporting the development of early literacy and numeracy. “Imagination, creativity and daring in the interpretation and implementation of the curriculum would greatly enhance the quality of young children’s learning experiences in infant classes...” (Dunphy, 2008, p.228). Nonetheless, the literature proposes that play has been construed in different ways within diverse cultural and social backgrounds in relation to its purpose and consequence to children’s development and its connection with education.

2.8 CPD DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHER CHANGE IN UNDERSTANDINGS

CPD, defined as professional development, consists of all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school, which constitute the quality of education in the classroom (Day, 1999). Excellent CPD is a fundamental element in virtually every contemporary proposal for developing education. Policy-makers increasingly attest that schools can be no better than the teachers who work in them. Although proposed CPD differ extensively in their substance and structure, the majority share the widespread objective to “alter the professional practices, beliefs, and understanding of school persons toward an articulated end” (Griffin, 1983, p.2). Usually that end is the development of student education, and CPD programs are methodical efforts to result in modification in classroom procedures of teachers, their understandings, and the learning outcomes of students. Since teachers are usually expected to participate in CPD by certification, they regard CPD programs as the optimum way to not only develop in the job (Fullan, 1991), but also to alleviate professional monotony and alienation. Furthermore, CPD is viewed as an avenue to strengthen competence and enhanced professional fulfilment (Huberman, 1995b).

The main appeal of CPD is the teacher belief that it will develop their skills and knowledge and improve their efficacy with students. Thus, what they desire to achieve during CPD are precise, tangible, and useful ideas that clearly connect with the everyday teaching of their classrooms (Fullan and Miles, 1992). These CPD programs are based on self identified needs.

Teachers are occasionally asked to do CPD. At times they do not attend to their specific needs and are not likely to be successful. Another significant factor is that many such professional development programs fail to think about the procedure of teacher change. CPD needs to consider the procedures by which change in teachers usually takes place. Guskey *et al* (2000) refer to failure to do this as one of the two main reasons why most CPD programs fail. The other is a failure to consider what inspires teachers to engage in CPD. Professional development learning experiences are planned to introduce change in teachers’ understandings. As such, professional development leaders frequently try to change teachers’ understandings regarding particular elements of teaching or the appeal of a specific curriculum. They assume these changes in teachers’ understandings will bring about definite changes in their classroom activities and teaching and enhanced student learning. This viewpoint on teacher change developed mainly from a model developed by early change

theorists for example (Lewin, 1935) who studied shaping change from psychotherapeutic models. An infant teachers' ability to engage in reflective practice can be reinforced and improved by consistent and ongoing professional development courses. These can consist of a range of forms comprising attendance at conferences, observation of teaching in other infant classrooms, and formal in-service courses. Research on CPD courses for teachers underlines the fact that significant characteristics must be present if the course is to be successful. These stipulate that the course:

“.....be embedded in the context of practice; engage and challenge the personal belief systems of the participant; stimulate and promote reflection in participants; integrate new knowledge with practice and recognise discourse as central to learning; recognise the need for continuity between old and new through practice; acknowledge the significance of the meaning making process and understand the need for time for its achievement” (Duignan, 2003, p.51).

These programs engage teachers in planning sessions and perform surveys to guarantee that the new practices or approaches are clearly related to teacher needs and desire (Joyce, 1976). As significant as these events are, they infrequently transform understandings considerably or precipitate obligation from teachers (Jones and Hayes, 1980). The 'Model of Teacher Change' in Figure 4 illustrates another approach:

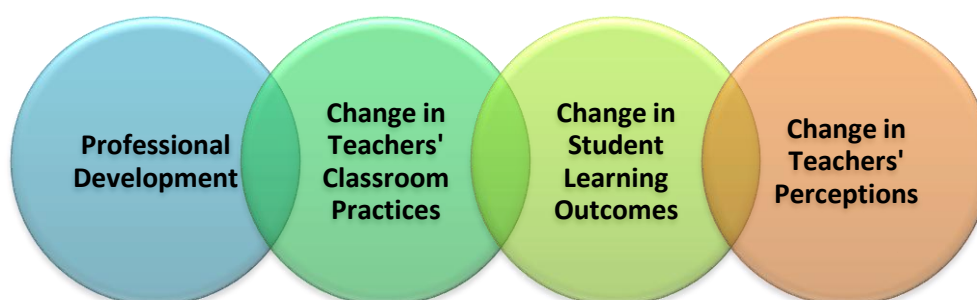


Figure 4: Model of Teacher Change

This model advocates a diverse progression between three main outcomes of professional development. Consistent with the model, the main component of professional development is the considerable change in teachers' understandings and the knock-on enhancement in student learning outcomes (Guskey, 1989, 1986, 1985). These enhancements arise from modifications which teachers have carried out in their classroom teaching, including a different instructional attitude, utilising new resources or curriculum, and/or a modification in teaching methods or classroom organisation. Understandings concerning teaching are mainly based on classroom experience. Learning outcomes are generally interpreted in the model to embrace not only cognitive and achievement indicators but also the extensive array of student behaviours and attitudes. These can consist of students' results

from standardised tests and assessments. They may also comprise students' attendance, their participation in class, classroom behaviour, motivation for learning, and attitudes toward the class, the school, and themselves. Learning outcomes include any type of proof teachers utilise to form an opinion on the efficacy of their teaching.

The crucial point of professional development and teacher change is that it is not the professional development per se, but rather the skill of successful implementation that changes teachers' understandings. They think it works because they have observed it work, and that experience forms their understandings. According to the model, the main component in important change in teacher understandings is transparent evidence of enhancement in the learning outcomes of their students (Guskey, 1989, 1986, 1985). This model of change is based on the notion that change is mainly a process based on experience for teachers. Practices that work, namely, those that teachers find functional in assisting students accomplish their learning outcomes, are employed and repeated. Those that do not work are normally abandoned. Provable results in terms of student learning outcomes are crucial to the stamina of any change in instructional practice.

Quality teaching has a considerable influence on various student outcomes. Teachers' influence is controlled by other factors such as, for example, students' prior learning and family background. If teachers are to employ this influence successfully, then like their students, they require occasions which intensify their comprehension and improve their skills. Teachers will not succeed in developing schooling for children until they recognise the significance of schools, not just as places for teachers to work, but as spaces for teachers to learn. The requirement for continuing learning surfaces because teaching barriers are not static. "Teachers should develop, not that other people should develop teachers" (McIntyre and Hagger, 1992, p.271). "Development' takes what is there as a valuable starting point; not as something to be replaced, but as a useful platform on which to build. To do so is to recognise not only that teachers do have valuable existing expertise but also that, if teachers are forced to choose, they will usually revert to their secure established ways of doing things. The metaphor of 'building on what is already there' is not, however, satisfactory because it suggests adding on something separate to what is there, something extra on top. The concept of development, in contrast, implies that whatever is added, whatever is new, will be integrated with what is there already, and will indeed grow from what is there." (ibid, 1992, p.271).

2.9 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

There is universal agreement that to be effectual, professional development must concentrate on teachers' requirements into new understanding, values, beliefs, and skills (Poekert, 2011). A unique characteristic of effectual professional development is teachers' dynamic participation in recognising their individual learning requirements and developing learning experiences to assist meeting those requirements (Parker, Patton and Tannehill, 2012). The learning outcomes of greatest importance to allow development as people, as workers, as community and family members and as fulfilled individuals, are those that allow them to keep learning when and where necessary, in a quickly altering, information and technology rich environment. As a result there is a necessity for teachers to develop an outlook regarding the types of learning that are most beneficial for students and to decide upon and devise methods to teaching and assessment. Affording occasions for teachers to contribute to what and how they learn and how they utilise this has resulted in ownership of and increased responsibility in professional development achievements. This particular configuration of professional development recognises teachers' previous knowledge and experience (Patton, Parker and Neutzling, 2012) and is presented in a number of styles to meet the extensive variety of teachers' learning requirements. A community of learners can be defined as:

“a group of people who share values and beliefs and who actively engage in learning from one another-learners from teachers, teachers from learners, and learners from learners. They thus create a learning-centered environment in which students and educators are actively and intentionally constructing knowledge together. Learning communities are connected, cooperative, and supportive. Peers are interdependent in that they have joint responsibility for learning and share resources and points of view, while sustaining a mutually respectful and cohesive environment” (Learning and the Adolescent Mind, p.1).

During this study I have come to think of a community of learners as a collection of people who share beliefs and values and who actively engage in learning from one another: learners from teachers; teachers from learners; and learners from learners. They all create a learning-centered environment wherein students and teachers are actively and deliberately building knowledge. Learning communities are connected, supportive, and encouraging. Peers are co-dependent in that they have a combined accountability for learning, and sharing resources and points of view, while maintaining a reciprocally respectful and unified environment. The very same principles that explain why students learn in communities of learners explain how teachers can learn in communities of teachers. Teachers must be in communities where they can enthusiastically and

passionately examine their own teaching, where they can always reflect on their own practice and its consequences, and where they can connect collaboratively with one another, to investigate, converse, discover, and learn from one another about what takes place when chance happens in their teaching. Moreover, as members of the community, teachers can lay a foundation of knowledge that goes beyond what any single one of them could learn in the remoteness which now typifies their classrooms. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) define developing professional capital as “developing professional capital is about helping people [teachers] to help themselves and help their students more effectively; it is not about manipulating them into complying with externally imposed requirements or delivering someone else’s vision” (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012, p.169).

Being accepted into a community of learners informs a lasting professional identity. The recognition of colleagues, developing a sense of belonging and an appreciation in the place of work are also important features of professional identity. Communities of learners offer “...a profound impact on teachers lives both in terms of their classroom practice and how they construct their professional identities” (ibid, 2003, p.133). Assisting teachers to be more effectual may ultimately signal change in their assessment practice and in their understandings of learning (James, 2007). Within a community of learners such changes can lead to sustained improvements in teaching and learning, where leaders respect and value a need that has been recognised by teachers as of importance to themselves: they are school-based and fundamental to school operations; there is teacher collaboration; and there is input from within and beyond the school to support teachers’ theoretical as well as practical learning. It will involve development of a critical awareness that change in one will and should, inexorably bring about the need for change in the other.

Professional development is a requirement which occasionally acts as a catalyst for transformation and corroboration of contemporary practice. It is both individual and social and has turned into a main concern for those looking to enhance students’ accomplishment of learning outcomes (Bredeson and Johansson, 2000). Although teachers must accept accountability for their own professional development, teacher learning is very much influenced by the school setting and management which has accountability for that environment (DiPaola and Hoy, 2014). Within a school setting teacher employment of a direct approach to teaching often aims to attain new knowledge and abilities through a

structured cycle, through modelling, demonstration, or illustration by the teacher. An inductive approach aims to develop an idea through a structured set of fixed stages wherein children gather and filter information. An exploratory approach to teaching and learning aims to practise and enhance understanding and skills, through pupils testing and deciding what information to gather. The degree to which pupils remember what they learn depends on the method taken to their learning. It is apparent that collaborative methods of teaching are the most efficient. Pupils also need to develop personal and group skills in order to deal with social contexts for learning and retain knowledge effectively. Vygotsky's ZPD underpins many methods to teaching and learning in the primary school curriculum: thus tasks which are too difficult for the child to solve unaccompanied can be accomplished with the assistance of adults/peers, through instruction, discussion, and encouragement.

2.10 AIM OF THE STUDY

Aistear offers a platform for infant primary school teachers to implement a play-based pedagogy. There are key issues when interweaving Aistear with the PSC. This research study seeks to ascertain these issues and elicit teacher understandings of the Aistear curriculum framework in their classroom whilst teaching the PSC. The review of the relevant literature reveals that a growing number of researchers have spent a considerable amount of time examining children's play from diverse angles and across numerous disciplines. However, research concerning infant teachers' understandings of play-based pedagogy has been relatively restricted. Whilst answering the research question, it was important to examine subsequent embedded questions which needed further investigation.

- What were infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy?
- What was the role of the infant teachers during Aistear?
- What potential barriers transpired when implementing Aistear?
- How could Aistear be used as an instrument to integrate with the PSC?

The literature reviewed in this section supports the research on play-based pedagogy in order to contextualise the current PSC and Aistear guidelines and practices. The theories of two key advocates, Mead and Bronfenbrenner, concerning early childhood development and how children learn best were introduced and explicated. The researcher next reviewed the

literature concerning the role of play-based pedagogy within the infant classroom. The review of literature concluded by elucidating the role of the teacher during play-based pedagogy activities and how CPD and teacher change within a professional community of learners has enhanced infant teachers learning and thinking.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

“Children learn as they play. Most importantly, in play children learn how to learn”

O. Fred Donaldson

3.0 INTRODUCTION

The aim of the qualitative researcher is to provide insights into the lives, experiences and understandings of the research participants. However, only partial understandings of such situations can be provided (Opie, 2004). Denzin (1978) stated that qualitative research involves the researcher viewing “human conduct from the point of view of those they are studying and is part of a studied commitment to actively enter the worlds of interacting individuals” (Denzin, 1978, p.8). While qualitative research has the advantages of allowing the researcher to gain knowledge from the direct experience of the teachers in the study, and provides an opportunity for data to be presented in the language of the teachers, it also inhere certain limitations (Opie, 2005, p.151). This chapter provides a summary of the methodological dimensions of this research study. De Vaus (2001, pp.14-15) states, “the more students and researchers are able to ensure coherence between their study’s design and its methodological characteristics, the more they will be able to defend the validity of their findings within the context of a particular methodological paradigm”. This chapter furthermore provides a comprehensive delineation of the selection of the sample, and the specific context in which the collection and subsequent analysis of data took place. Ethical considerations, reflexivity and limitations of the study are also outlined.

3.1 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Johnson and Christensen (2008) recognise that the treatment of research participants is the most fundamental ethical issue for researchers to consider when conducting research with human involvement. In order to ensure the ethical considerations were upheld within this research, an ethics application was submitted to the University of Limerick, Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of

data collection. This study was granted ethics approval by the Committee (Appendix 1). The teachers were then asked to read the covering letter and informed consent was obtained from all teachers prior to commencing the survey. All data was collected anonymously and confidentially and teachers were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time before their responses were submitted.

The ethical issues arising in relation to the individual interviews, classroom observations, and focus groups were informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. The right to withdraw at any time was not exercised by any of the teachers in the study. Each teacher was assigned a pseudonym to guarantee anonymity. Any references to the teachers names, schools, and/or sensitive information that could identify either the teacher or their school was not revealed during the interview recordings and any unintentional references were removed from the transcripts of these recordings. The privacy of the teachers was treated with the utmost care by the researcher. In accordance with the Data Protection Act of 1988, data was held in reserve for the period of the research study plus three years, after which all data were destroyed safely. Data gathered from the research study was converted onto an external USB memory drive. All hard copies of interviews notes and transcripts were also held in a locked filing cabinet for the period of the study plus three years. All relevant teachers were informed of the opportunity to obtain the final research report through the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences, University of Limerick.

3.2 PARTICIPANTS AND SETTINGS

The participants consisted of four infant teachers, two of whom were junior infant teachers, and two of whom were junior and senior infant teachers. This ensured a balance of teachers teaching at both infant class levels. All four infant teachers embarked on Aistear training: one night a week for six weeks at education centres nationwide. Two of the teachers were educated in primary education prior to the publication of the Aistear framework. The most practised teacher was educated in 1992 and the latest teacher to qualify graduated in 2013. Four teachers were willing to participate in the research from twenty selected different primary schools (Table 2). The research sample was based on primary school teachers working in junior and senior infant classes. Consequently, the purposive sampling method was deemed the best method to choose people for this study.

Moreover, the purposive approach was aimed at scheduling a compilation of deliberately chosen cases to research the phenomenon of interest (Bell, 2005; Walliman, 2005). The research took form of a small-scale study within four primary schools in Ireland. The schools were located in both urban and rural primary school settings and consisted of male, female and mixed gender students. Information packs were posted to infant teachers in primary school settings and included a letter of information to the teacher participating in the study and a consent form. Teachers were then contacted in order to conduct Phase 1 individual interviews and classroom observations at a convenient date, time and location:

Participant	Gender	Length of service	Class Structure	Class Gender
AMY	Female	6 years	Junior Infants - 30	Boys
ELLA	Female	2 years	Junior/Senior Infants - 20: 7 Junior and 13 Senior Infants	Mixed
DAWN	Female	9 years	Junior Infants - 34	Girls
CIARA	Female	20 years	Junior/Senior Infants – 22: 8 Junior and 14 Senior Infants	Mixed

TABLE 2: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

3.2.1 AMY

The school in which Amy taught was in an urban area with an enrolment of 210 boys. At the time of this study, Amy had been teaching for six years at infant level and was currently teaching a class of 30 boys. Upon entering the classroom, I found a lively and colourful room entirely centred upon children and active learning including, sight words, the alphabet, numbers charts. Inspirational quotes, such as ‘What we think, we become’, ‘The best preparation for tomorrow is doing your best today’ and ‘Try to be a rainbow in someone’s cloud’ covered the walls while large bulletin boards proudly displayed children’s work. The classroom was small for the number of children in the room. Five round tables and chairs were situated in the centre of the classroom. The walls were painted bright yellow which gave a warm feel to it, while one complete side of the classroom consisted of windows which introduced plenty of natural light into the classroom. A dress-up corner and a library corner were in place in the classroom. There were two toilets to the back of the classroom setting. Moby Dick (the class goldfish) was situated in a large fish bowl on a display stand at the rear of the classroom.

3.2.2 ELLA

Ella taught in a co-educational primary school. The school was set at the centre of a beautiful scenic village with a well-landscaped green and many mature trees. There is an enrolment of 69 pupils at this school. Ella had been teaching at this school for two years at infant level. Her class consisted of 20 junior and senior infants of mixed gender. This was made up of seven junior infants (four boys and three girls) and 131 senior infants (eight boys and five girls). Ella's classroom consisted of four round tables and chairs placed in the centre of the classroom, a desk at the back of the classroom with books on it, and all other kinds of school supplies. The classroom was square shaped and had windows both to the left and the right. The teachers' desk was placed at the top of the class with two book shelves to her right with books in one and art supplies, toys and games in the other. Art work was displayed on the walls, as was educational posters and rules of the classroom. The classroom was painted cream and had green carpet on the floor.

3.2.3 DAWN

There is an enrolment of 317 pupils at the all girl's primary school, in which Dawn taught. Dawn had been teaching at this school for nine years at infant level. She is teaching 34 junior infant girls. The room had five round tables, two at each side of the classroom and the fifth table placed in the centre. Lots of posters of nursery rhymes, counting, colours and animals covered the walls, while children's work was on the art wall at the back of the classroom. Snakes hung from the ceiling which the children had made during art class. Dawn's desk was positioned at the left side of the room near the window and the windows are on the left side of the classroom. Walls were painted cream and had brown carpet on the floor. There was one toilet in the classroom setting.

3.2.4 CIARA

Ciara's school is co-educational, with an enrolment of 87 pupils. Ciara has been teaching at this school for 20 years, and has been teaching junior and senior infants for the last five years. Ciara is currently teaching 22 boys and girls; eight juniors and fourteen seniors. The classroom was a large room decorated with children's photographs, educational posters, and children's work. The room offered a selection of play activities for the children to engage in, including construction area, dress up area, jigsaws, play-dough and a reading zone area.

The room was bright and airy and contained five round tables, two at each side of the classroom, and the final one positioned in the middle. Ciara's desk was at the front of the room, and a low size cupboard which accommodated art materials was to the left of this.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative research is primarily exploratory research. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It is also used to uncover trends in thought and opinions, and dive deeper into the problem. It entails interviews, observations and focus group sessions (Silverman, 2006). While “quantitative research is concerned with producing facts and figures; numerical data and quantities” (Silverman, 2006; Mac Naughton *et al.*, 2001, p.52) and the exercise of “surveys” or “questionnaires” (Silverman, 2006; Pole and Lampard, 2002), qualitative research is a type of knowing which is predominantly attuned to the study of how features of social life are created and recreated. The aim was to eventually construct a profound comprehension of *infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy within the Irish context* using qualitative data (Burton, 2000). Employing this method, the understandings of infant teachers were elicited and examined to develop insights via the gathered (Burton, 2000). Human behaviour is manipulated by specific states of affairs and social situations, and not always generalisable from the individual to a larger number of people. Nonetheless, since individual or cluster experiences enrich many elements of people's lives, qualitative researchers concentrating on the deepness and extensiveness of such data (Denscombe, 2010).

As Figure 5 illustrates the present study (Figure 5) was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 consisted of individual interviews with the teachers, classroom observations of teachers during play, and a research diary. Phase 2 consisted of pre-focus group, training sessions with the teachers, classroom observations, and a post-focus group. The data sources were used to identify a contrast between current ideas between teachers, thereby enabling verification and confirmation of concerns, proposals, and attitudes.

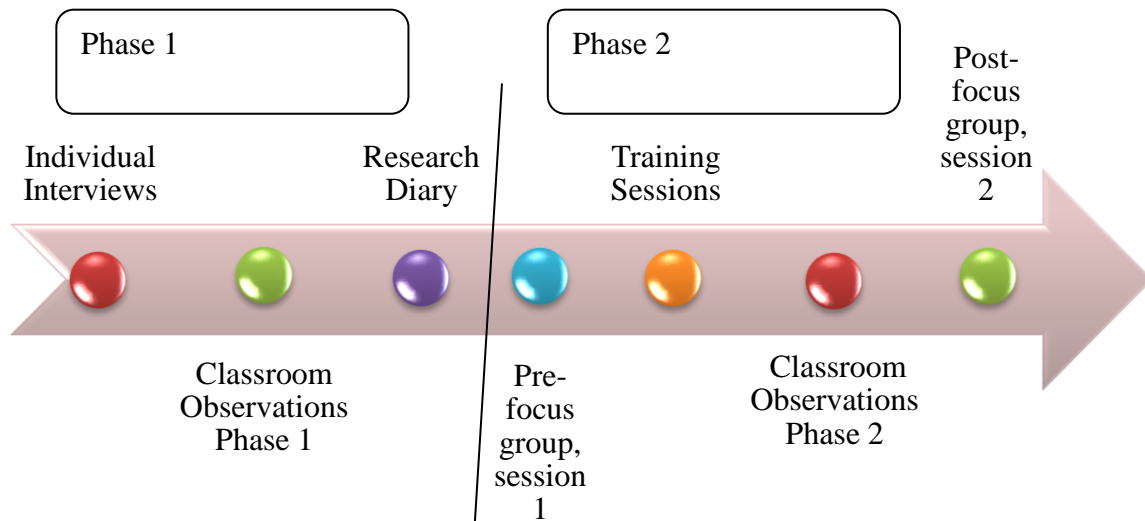


Figure 5: Research Design

3.4 DATA COLLECTION

Data sources for this study included; individual interviews, classroom observations, focus group sessions, and training sessions. For further clarity, ‘individual interviews’ refers to one-to-one teacher interviews; ‘classroom observations Phase 1’ refers to observations of teacher interactions with children before the training sessions; ‘classroom observations Phase 2’ refers to observations of teacher interactions with children after the training sessions; ‘Pre-focus group, session 1’ refers to the first group of interviews with the four infant teachers; and ‘Post-focus group, session 2’ refers to the second group of interviews with the four infant teachers.

The role of a teacher is much more than numbers and data. The relationships fashioned during the teaching and learning process are what define teaching. The most valuable aspect which takes place during the process is the reciprocal knowledge accumulated during the process; the position that learning and teaching during relational processes promotes lifelong learning. Data sources were used, and individual interviews conducted at a time and place that was convenient to both the teachers and researcher. Individual interviews were audiotaped on a recording device and subsequently transcribed for data analysis. Each of the four teachers was interviewed individually and twice through a pre-focus and post-focus group session. Observations Phase 1 and Phase 2 were conducted in the teachers’ classrooms and pre- and post-focus group sessions were conducted in the staffroom

of Participant 1's school. Focus group sessions were also audiotaped with a recording device and subsequently transcribed.

3.4.1 INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Four individual interviews were conducted by the researcher. This method was deemed most appropriate for the purposes of this study due to the interactive disposition that looks into a description and understanding of one's social world (Miller and Glassner, 2004). While the interviews were pre-structured for particular themes and topics to be discussed, they were also devised to allow deeper probing into the answers given and for the teachers to steer the direction of the interview. The semi-structured character of the interview permitted the researcher to elicit whatever the respondents deemed significant in expounding their understandings. Such probing yielded further data and potential information. An interview schedule was developed based on the aims and objectives of the study (Appendix 2-6). Initially, the teachers were asked to share certain background information about themselves to establish a relationship and provide context. Thereafter, the interview consisted of a range of questions designed to achieve both breadth of coverage across key issues, and depth of content within each. This included questions relating to their understandings and practices of play-based pedagogy in the infant classroom, as well as the support and barriers they come across in implementing this in practice. Suggestions and recommendations to improve play-based pedagogy practices were also sought. Certain considerations were taken into account to do this.

The researcher used clear, open-ended questions. Open-ended questions do not limit, but rather offer an opportunity for the researcher to accumulate a range of responses from the teachers. Using the qualitative method allowed the teachers to reflect on their classroom experiences with play. According to Denscombe (2007, p.176) "the researcher only has one person's ideas to grasp and interrogate, and one person to guide through the interview agenda". The literature review shaped the foundation for many of the interview questions. The interview questions had been piloted with an external lecturer and minor modifications made to the questions and structure. Data was generated in this research study by means of electronic recording, each interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes and all interviews were conducted in the teacher's own classroom after school.

These interviews informed the first focus group. Subsequent areas drawn on during individual interviews were explored further into teacher understandings of the following areas:

What potential barriers transpired when implementing Aistear?

What were infant teacher understandings of the significance of play?

To what extent were infant teachers confident in their training on Aistear?

How could Aistear be used as an instrument to complement the PSC?

What was the role of the infant teachers during Aistear?

3.4.2 CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

Observations were used to supplement the teacher's responses about their understanding of Aistear and how it had been implemented. Such observations were also deemed a suitable and powerful tool to harness the dynamic nature of play in classroom practice, such as actions and interactions, and thus provide a more complete picture of teachers' understandings on play-based pedagogy: in short, to see Aistear in practice. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p.456) indicate that "observation's unique strength" is its capacity to make "valid and authentic data" because it concentrates on the collection of data collected directly by examining actual situations. Since observations directly informed what was happening in-situ rather than reliance on a second-hand account, more valid and genuine data was expected to be generated. Robson (2002) states that individuals in reality may differ from what they articulate. Therefore, observations were interwoven with individual interviews in order to confirm the findings.

Classroom observations were documented using the Assessment and Planning for Children's Learning (Barnardos, 2012) (Appendix 8-9) observation schedule, thus allowing for a variety of observations to be recorded during the research procedure. This observation schedule was fit for purpose because it was specifically devised for the observation of small group learning experiences. Assessment is informed by continuous observation. Observations provide the basis of information for more in-depth evaluation which is essential to how best support children's learning. Each of the four individual classroom observations Phase 1 focused on play-based pedagogy understandings in the infant classroom: i.e. Aistear with each observation lasting for one hour every week for two weeks. Table 3 below demonstrates the timeline of focus groups, training sessions, and classroom observations Phase 2.

1/P1 refers to observation 1/Participant 1, 1/P2 refers to observation 1/Participant 2, 4/P3 refers to observation 4/Participant 3 and 4/P4 refers to observation 4/Participant 4. The three main aims of professional development programs are change in the classroom teachings of teachers, change in their understandings, and change in the learning outcomes of students. Most importantly, change depends on the order in which outcomes most regularly take place. The connection with these outcomes is comprehensive and many issues can complicate the change progression (Guskey and Sparks 1996; Fullan, 1991):

October 01 st 2015 Pre-focus group Session 1 Discussion	October 05 th 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 1/P1 Classroom observation phase 2, 1/P2	October 06 th 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 1/P3 Classroom observation phase 2, 1/P4	October 08 th 2015 Session 2 Discussion	October 12 th 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 2/P1 Classroom observation phase 2, 2/P2	October 13 th 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 2/P3 Classroom observation phase 2, 2/P4	October 15 th 2015 Session 3 Discussion
October 19 th 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 3/P1 Classroom observation phase 2, 3/P2	October 20 th 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 3/P3 Classroom observation phase 2, 3/P4	November 05 th 2015 Session 4 Discussion	November 09 th 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 4/P1 Classroom observation phase 2, 4/P2	November 10 th 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 4/P3 Classroom observation phase 2, 4/P4	November 12 th 2015 Session 5 Discussion	November 16 th 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 5/P1 Classroom observation phase 2, 5/P2
November 17 th 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 5/P3 Classroom observation phase 5, 1/P4	November 19 th 2015 Session 6 Discussion	November 23 rd 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 6/P1 Classroom observation phase 2, 6/P2	November 24 th 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 6/P3 Classroom observation phase 2, 6/P4	November 26 th 2015 Session 1-6	November 30 th 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 1-6/P1 Classroom observation phase 2, 1-6/P2	December 01 st 2015 Classroom observation phase 2, 1-6/P3 Classroom observation phase 2, 1-6/P4
December 02 nd 2015 Post-focus group Session 2 Discussion						

Table 3: Timeline of focus groups, training sessions, and classroom observations Phase 2

3.4.3 FOCUS GROUPS

Beck, Trombetta and Share (1986) describe the focus group as an informal conversation among particular individuals about detailed topics relevant to the circumstances at hand. This focus group method was chosen since such groups can be most effective when trying to locate issues in areas where little previous research exists (Fontana and Frey, 2005). Focus group interviews were chosen to engage with the infant teachers on the ground in a

face-to-face situation and to further explore some of the areas covered in the individual semi-structured interviews. The pre- and post-focus group comprised of the four infant teachers. The findings from the individual semi-structured interviews set up the agenda of issues to be explored at these meetings. The design of the focus groups interviews was based on a group of four teachers sitting around a table having a guided conversation on understandings on play-based pedagogy. The duration of the session was approximately one hour. The questions which were put to focus group participants followed the pattern of the individual semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, the focus group method afforded teachers the occasion to respond to their fellow teachers' responses and prompted them to more deeply think about their own responses, subsequently drawing out more information. Indeed, such participant responses can trigger extra spontaneous questions from the interviewer can consequently yield further more information. To complete this phase of the research study, a post-focus group, session 2 took place on order to determine whether the infant teachers' understandings had altered due to the implementation of training sessions (Appendix 7).

Focus group talks are unlike other forms of group interviews, as involvement is accentuated among group members as an important feature in generating depth of discussion (Berg, 2004). Focus groups combine the strengths of semi-structured interviews with the opportunity to observe human interaction in the form of group dynamics (Pole and Lampard, 2002), thereby giving the researcher a heightened insight into their real issues and concerns. Focus groups relax participants and allow them to lose their inhibitions to reveal their opinions, feelings, and emotions. Thus, in this study, the focus group discussions generated realistic and dynamic accounts of the teachers' understandings of the Aistear play-based pedagogy. Focus groups also have the capability to produce data that individual interviews may not reveal since the process of comprehending social phenomena occurs through interaction and discussion with others; something which is more likely within focus group circumstances rather than individual interviews. Typically, a focus group is made up of a small number of participants who are led by a moderator; in this instance, the researcher. Questions for focus groups were derived from the findings of individual interviews and classroom observations Phase 1, whilst also considering the leading research question. It is helpful to insert periodic timestamps into the transcripts, for example, when a new participant spoke. The transcripts simplified subsequent cross-checks. In parts that were unclear on the audio tape, the researcher was rapidly able to locate the part on the audio tape as time stamps gave a marker.

This enabled the researcher to return to exact excerpts without listening to the whole audio recording. General identifiers were used to identify the participants. ‘P 1’ for Participant 1, ‘Participant 2’ for Participant 2 and so on and ‘M’ for moderator. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and following transcription, the ‘participant’ was replaced with a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

3.5 REFLECTIVE DIARY

Classroom observations Phase 1 were complemented by the use of a reflective diary for the duration of the research study. The reflective diary was a hardback notebook consisting of thoughts which occurred to the researcher at different key points during the study; primarily immediately following classroom and teacher observations. The reflective diary included:

- Planning details of the research
- Twice-weekly annotation recording details of observations such as grouping arrangements of the class for various activities, role-play activities completed, props used and different types of play observed
- Reflective remarks focusing on the positive and negative aspects of the play episode, the degree of participation in the activities, and the observed behaviour of children and the teacher

The diary provided additional clarity into how the researcher interpreted situations, allocated meaning to actions and events, and documented personal experiences and feelings on the research study from beginning to end (Alaszewski, 2006). The reflective diary consisted of four pages of notes in relation to classroom observations. A sample entry can be seen in Appendix 10.

3.6 TRAINING SESSIONS

Training sessions as a data source were requested by the infant teachers and developed by the researcher and infant teachers (Appendix 16-25). These training sessions were a result of a desire of the teachers to be given guidelines for practice, this then led to the organic templates being developed collaboratively which, in turn, led to a relaxation of traditional teachers’ practices so that their subsequent practice better aligned with that expected from Aistear. Researcher and teachers devised a themed organic lesson plan (Appendix 15) in conjunction with the adapted environmental guidelines from

‘Communication Classroom Observation Tool’ (Dockrell *et al.*, 2012) (Appendix 12) which was incorporated as a learning instrument during the play-based sessions. This observation tool was designed to be used during an observation of a classroom or a learning space by the teacher working with the children. The observation tool can be used in early years learning spaces and was designed to profile the oral language environment of the classroom. Learning stories for documentation of learning underpinning the Aistear framework were also exercised. A learning story is a record of what a teacher/researcher has seen a child or group of children doing in an early childhood curriculum. As such, they manage formative assessment, including feed-back, feed-forward to children, other workers, and families to enhance learning and teaching. Learning stories are designed to support teachers with the procedures of observing, identifying, and responding to learning through the Aistear framework and to contribute in discussions regarding assessment, while encouraging valuable opportunities to discover in the infant classroom. The themed schedule was an aid for teachers identifying different areas on a theme for children’s learning to take place; this theme was ‘the farm’ (Appendix 15). It consisted of five play learning areas: namely, 1) Sociodramatic Area; 2) Maths Area, 3) Literacy Area; 4) Construction Area; and 5) Art Area. Each area consists of four activities. Lesson plans always begin with a beginning, middle, and ending. The organic lesson plan was designed around a topic-based plan which lasted for four weeks. This plan was implemented every day for five days a week with five different areas. The class was divided into five groups with each group working on a different station each day.

A major roadblock for the teachers was that of Aistear overload: with too many aims and learning goals to consider. Through a professional learning community, the researcher and infant teachers designed organic lesson plans in which specific aims and learning goals were focused on for each monthly theme (the farm). Activity 1/Week 1 only incorporated aim 1, learning goal 1 for all themes for that week. The next monthly theme (the hospital), the focus would move to a new set of Aistear aims and learning goals. Each set comprised of four Aistear aims and 24 learning goals. Using this method over a 16-week period through overarching themes resulted in the accomplishment of all the aims and learning goals of Aistear. Unlike before, the teachers in the research study found this approach realistic while also feeling in control of the planning process. Teachers used the organic lesson plan template as a guide to create their play session plans, and each week an observation of a play session with each teacher took place to enhance further learning and to highlight whether any

problems occurred. The content of this training was vital. Although teachers are trained, they but should be better educated in why play-based pedagogy is important for children's learning and how learning can arise from play (Moyle, 2010). Training sessions and teacher observations took place from October to December 2015 for six weeks. Towards the end of each session a question and answer session was used as an instrument for the evaluation of learning and assessment for future learning. One post-focus group, session 2, a training session and six teacher organic lesson plans were developed, two organic lesson plans from each teacher are documented (Appendix 16-25) took place from 1st October 2015 to 2nd December 2015 (Table 3.2). A planned return visit to the four infant classes was then scheduled to monitor infant teachers' lesson delivery and development through Aistear.

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach. Thematic analysis is a method for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). Although Howitt (2010) saw thematic analysis as a qualitative data analysis method, Boyatzis (1998) understood it as "not another qualitative method but a process that can be used with most, if not all, qualitative methods" (p.4). Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) purported that thematic analysis has a quantity of advantages. It is uncomplicated and easy to use for students and beginners to qualitative methods and it can accommodate rich and comprehensive data which is pertinent to diverse theoretical approaches. Primarily, its research findings are comparatively simple for the general public and policy-makers to comprehend (Howitt, 2010). Nonetheless, there are disadvantages of thematic analysis. As by Braun and Clarke (2006) caution, numerous thematic analyses demonstrate a "lack of transparency" and indistinct guidelines imply an "anything goes critique of qualitative research" (p.78). Such remarks may adversely influence the readers' assurance in the quality of the analysis.

As Howitt (2010) recommends that researchers have "intimate knowledge of their data" (p.164) I closely adhered to strict procedures for collecting, transcribing, reading, and re-reading the data in order to familiarise myself with the materials. Additionally, the process of transcription is described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology because it has the potential to shape the understanding and interpretation of data and how meanings are created.

The thematic analysis comprised six steps (Table 5) as follows:

Step One: after collecting the interview data, I transcribed the data verbatim, then summarised it. I organised the data according to the type of data collection method used (interview transcripts, observation guide, focus group interview and research diary notes; see Appendix 2-10), and filed it in chronological order. I then followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) step-by-step guide for thematic analysis. The aim of the first step was "familiarizing yourself with your data" (ibid, p.87). I read and re-read the data so as to know and become 'intimate' with it. Simultaneously, I took notes and contemplated an informal way to code the data. This formed the "bedrock for the rest of the analysis" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.87). Without this process, the analytic undertaking could be insufficient (Howeitt, 2010).

Step Two: entailed "generating initial codes." After fully familiarising myself with the data and developing some coding ideas, I began to isolate the more interesting components within the raw data. At the outset the coding was data-driven as the coded themes rely on the data. After the first coding, I then went through the coded themes using the research questions and coded in an attempt to identify particular features of the data, such as the role of the infant teacher. I coded the extracts manually, using either colour coding or photocopying the observation guide and cutting the extracts into pieces.

Step Three: was dedicated to "searching for themes". I initially focused on broader levels of themes. The third step required re-organisation of diverse codes for potential themes and sub-themes. As I had also considered the relation between codes and different levels of themes and sub-themes, I also revisited the processes of organising themes and sub-themes whenever essential.

Step Four: entailed the re-examination of themes. I collected the themes and sub-themes to form an all-inclusive picture of the teachers' shared experiences (Table 4).

Step Five: involved defining and naming themes. I therefore revised the thematic map and refined the particulars of different themes and sub-themes. I tried to make sense of the overall picture of the analysis.

Step Six: entailed providing support for my analysis. Table 5 indicates the step-by-step process via analysis was conducted. In this final step of coding, I identified four themes, some of which had a number of sub-themes. They were selected as examples of the key ideas discussed on the basis of the key terms generated from the coding processes. As the coding served to underline the points to be made in relation to the research questions, it was used to select the relevant excerpts presented in Chapter 4.



Table 4: Four themes and sub-themes

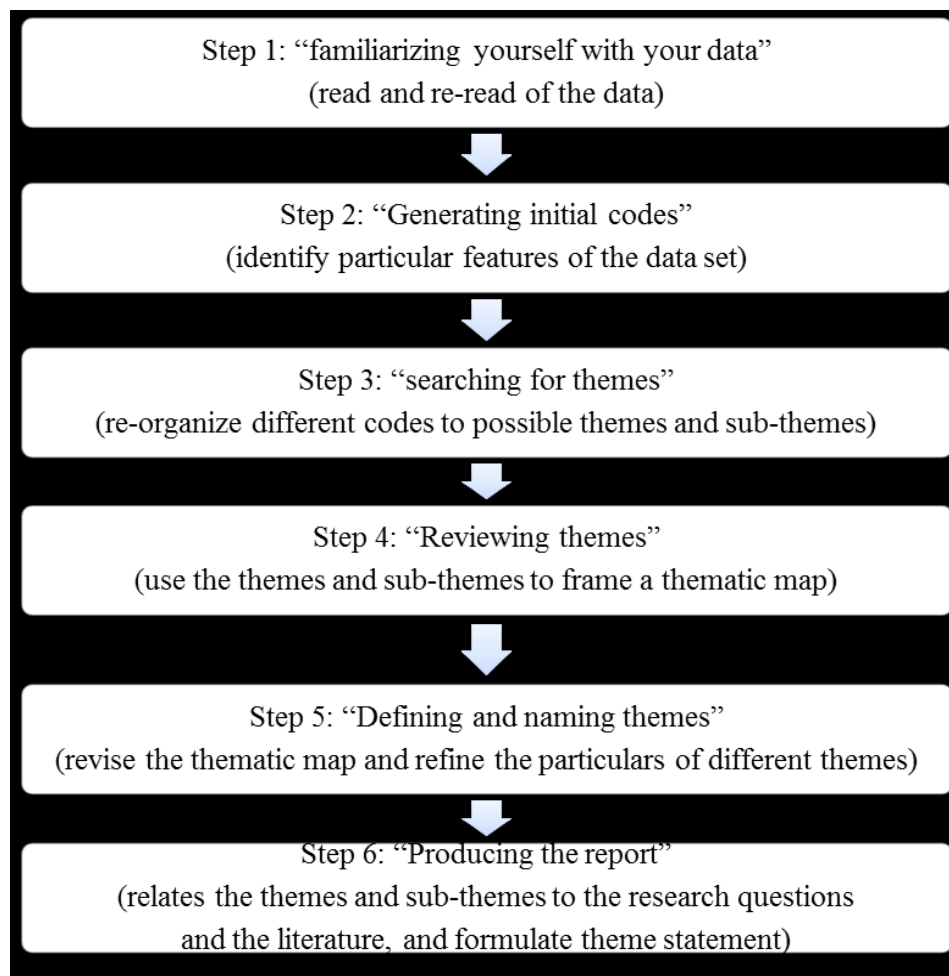


Table 5: Braun and Clark's Thematic Approach

3.8 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness was established utilising several techniques. First, triangulation employing multiple data sources was used to confirm the findings (Merriam, 2009). Data were triangulated for analytical purposes across all data sources (interviews, observations, focus groups, and reflective diary). Robson (2002) advised qualitative researchers on the importance of conducting thorough, careful, and honest research. It is important that this is apparent to any reader. One way to ensure trustworthiness is to ‘triangulate’ the data through the use of several data sources. The combination of more than one data collection and analysis instruments aimed to overcome any possible bias that might result from a single instrument. Patton (1990) states clearly that “triangulation is a process by which the evaluator can guard against the accusation that a study findings are simply an artefact of a single method, a single source, or single investigator’s bias” (ibid, 1980, p.332). Pole and Lampard (2002) assert that triangulation can also highlight interesting contradictions. In this study, the use of triangulation produced data from various sources which enabled checking and cross-referencing.

According to Creswell (2009, p 190), qualitative validity “means that the researcher checks for accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures”. The strength of the argument lies in the fact that the findings are accurate from the point of view of the researcher, the teachers and the subsequent readers of the study. Creswell (2009, p.191) underlines the importance of “trustworthiness, authenticity and credibility”, while Tashakkori and Teddie (1998, p.81) suggest that the subjective opinions of respondents are “not actually an index of the validity of the instrument, you have to use other strategies to determine the validity of your measurement”. With this in mind, the individual interviews were conducted in advance, which contributed to the validity. Instructions for the individual interviews were clear and unambiguous. The interview schedule was prepared based on the research questions and the same topics were explored with all teachers. All of the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. This ensured ability to assess any differences as they arose.

There are some disadvantages to the interview process, including the possibility that the familiarity with the interviewer could influence the respondents’ answers by portraying a bias. The tone in which the questions are asked may also influence the responses. However, the professionalism of the participants involved in this particular study minimised this

possibility and the use of triangulation further contributed to reliability. In this study, the use of infant teachers in the interviews and the teacher participants in the observations and focus groups gave credibility which Tashakkori and Teddie describe as using “experts to help you judge the degree to which a particular measurement instrument seems to measure what it is supposed to measure” (1998, p.81). Coding was used to interpret the data in an unbiased fashion. A list of the most frequently occurring words used by the interviewees was carried out which enabled me to identify possible themes at an early stage of the study.

In addition, pre-focus group, session 1 developed upon the original data to determine the genuineness of the emerging themes. Teachers were asked to consider the themes presented to them by the researcher before the pre-focus group, session 1, so as to ascertain that the themes represented an accurate description of their views. The pre-focus group, session 1 allowed for questioning of particular issues that were pertinent to each teacher. The method to develop the validity of the research study is identified as member checking (Creswell and Miller, 2000).

3.8.1 REFLEXIVITY AND BIAS

“Reflexivity entails sensitivity to the researcher’s cultural, political, and social context” (Bryman, 2012, p.393). Reflexivity is the researcher’s process of reflecting on their own beliefs in the same manner as they examine the beliefs of their research participants. The researcher was also diligent in not allowing bias and assumptions to adulterate the data analysis process. The intention was to merely present the findings using the words of the teachers and the extent literature reviewed for the purpose of this study. Creswell and Miller (2000) believe the researcher should self-disclose their philosophy and biases early in the development of the study as the validity of a study can be affected by bias.

In qualitative research, the researcher is not the only principal tool or medium through which the research is managed, but also the interpreter who makes logic of the information. The researchers’ values, knowledge, emotion, and personal knowledge inevitably form the research undertaking in significant ways. In light of this, it is crucial that researchers be reflect on their knowledge, approach, assumptions and bias throughout the duration of the research process. Research is important, but an over-reliance on objectivity alone may not be possible: what is imperative then, is that the researcher is aware of preconceived ideas prior to the research.

In this research study the researcher took the role of both an insider and outsider. Being a native from Ireland and having been in education for many years, the researcher knew the education system in Ireland, as well as teachers' daily school routines. At this stage it's important to clarify that the researcher has a background in Speech and Drama and ECCE but not in primary teaching. Chen (2000) argued that in a way, the 'real insider' does not exist, because when a researcher is carrying out a study on the culture in which he/she lives, there is distance between her and the culture. The researcher can only create knowledge by asking questions, staying in the context, and cautiously observing behaviours. Therefore, in this sense the researcher was considered to be an outsider who entered the field, interacted with infant teachers, and sought to understand their understandings intimately.

I was conscious that reflexivity on the researchers' biases, assumptions, prejudices and opinions was an ongoing undertaking in this research (Rossman and Rallis, 2003). These were set aside and I accepted that I was a stranger to the setting and sought to establish a professional rapport with the teachers, while also continually reflecting on the relationships during the research process. Upon the first meeting with the infant teachers, they expressed a warm welcome to the researcher, and hoped that this research could help them make improvements in their role as facilitators of learning in the infant classroom.

3.9 LIMITATIONS

Although the researcher diligently addressed the core study questions, the ensuing findings were inevitably subject to certain limitations. While the sample is small and generalisation is not possible, it does provide a rich basis for further research. To obtain a broader and deeper understanding of teacher-participants' perspectives, individual interviews and classroom observations covering a longer period could be carried out. Another limitation of the research study was that teachers may possibly participate in "showcase" pedagogies instead of doing what they usually practice in their classrooms. Thus, they might obscure their real beliefs, present a perfect self, or inform the researcher what they believe the researcher must or needs to hear (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p.344). According to Pole and Lampard (2002) being practical about research means acknowledging and working within restrictions. One such restriction was the timeframe associated with the research study.

The primary data (individual interviews and classroom observations Phase 1) were assembled from March 24th 2014 to April 4th 2014, and the pre-focus group session 1 was completed on October 1st 2015. Training sessions and classroom observations Phase 2 took place from October 2015 to December 2015 for six weeks. Finally, the post-focus group session 2 was conducted on December 2nd 2015. The researcher had to consider the school calendar, for example, mid-term breaks and guest speakers. In line with Pole and Lampard (2002) the researcher believed the time constraints created important landmarks concerning what had to be completed within the given timeframe. They also note the significance of work costs as the most important feature in embarking on research (Pole and Lampard, 2002). For example, “an hour-long interview takes approximately seven hours to transcribe” (Pole and Lampard, 2002, p.40). Furthermore, and as documented by (Mac Naughton *et al.*, 2001), data analysis entails numerous days or weeks of work.

I had originally planned to use the NVivo software package to assist with the analysis of the interview data so as to compare themes generated with those from the manual handling and to provide complementary themes to the manual analysis. This was ultimately unnecessary, as due to modest sample size of four participants the researcher deemed it feasible to analyse the data manually. The researcher’s manual handling of qualitative data frequently harnesses understanding and reflection, which educes a more comprehensive, adaptable and detailed comprehension of the information. This can yield an imaginative and deep interpretation which, for the most part, computer software has difficulty in handling. Consequently, manual analysis was more appropriate than electronic analysis in this instance.

3.10 CONCLUSION

In conclusion this research study aimed to conduct *an exploration of infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy within the Irish context*. In order to conduct this research study, it was decided a triangulation approach would be appropriate. The first step in this approach was an extensive review of existing literature on this topic. Semi-structured interview questions were developed from which classroom observations were devised. A thematic analysis outlined four themes and strands within these themes. Findings from classroom observations Phase 1 resulted in pre-focus group, session 1. Findings from here resulted in training sessions and classroom observations Phase 2 and concluded with a post-focus group session 2.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

“Play is the highest form of research”

Albert Einstein

4.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports the findings of the study according to each research question. Since a total of four participants were interviewed in this study with the aim of capturing their understandings of play-based pedagogy, the data elicited from the interviews, focus groups and observations are organised and presented under four key analytical themes. Thematic analyses were applied to highlight and organise key responses that corroborate my key findings and advance more systematic discussions. The views of teachers are summarised under key themes and a number of direct quotes drawn upon to illustrate the depth and richness of the qualitative data. This chapter elaborates on four main themes as follows:

THEME 1: Teacher Understandings of Play-Based Pedagogy

- Definition of play
- Social learning
- Numeracy and Literacy
- Drama
- Play-based pedagogy perceptions

THEME 2: Teachers’ Role during Play

- Various roles

THEME 3: Barriers when implementing Play

- Time
- Space
- Resources
- CPD

THEME 4: Integrating Aistear with the PSC

- Insignificant knowledge
- Formal versus Informal
- ‘Aistear Time’

4.1 THEME 1: TEACHER UNDERSTANDINGS OF PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY

The teachers consider play to be an essential part of early childhood education and an important vehicle through which children learn. While the teachers concurred that play is vital for young children's development, they also felt they had not been afforded the opportunity to understand how to properly implement Aistear in the classroom. The teachers defined play as a child-centred method to teach children in developing social skills and to learn independently from an adult. The most frequently cited capacities developed during Aistear were the 'social skills' of communicating, turn-taking, sharing, collaboration, co-operation, and interactions:

"Their social skills are developed as they work together in groups and help each other in their learning." (Amy, Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

Ciara maintained that:

"Children want to learn. They enjoy learning." (Ciara, Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15)

Indeed, Amy emphasised how during play:

"...children can freely collaborate with each other" (Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15)

This clearly encourages the use and consequently the development of social skills. Dawn also emphasised that play:

"teaches co-operative behaviour and promotes turn-taking" (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

While all participants held that social skills were *"the most important skills for children in infant class."* Ella maintained that Aistear:

"...teaches children to partake in play and to work in partnership." (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

This remark also chimed with Amy who observed that:

"Aistear provides children the possibility to socialise with children they might not have played with before." (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

Given these responses, it is clear that socialisation is an inherent element of Aistear. This was most evident when Ella engaged the children in the activity of sorting farm animals. The children worked in groups of two, encouraging communication and team-building. This gave rise to harmonious interactions between all children as well demonstrating Ella's positive communication skills in deploying a number of open-ended questions to further engage the students (Classroom Observation Phase 2, 03-10-2015). Dawn commented that:

"Aistear encourages children's participation and turn-taking skills rather than a question and answer session." (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

Likewise, Ciara attested that:

"Aistear has really developed children's participation and contribution in activities, but the real change for me is the change in children's turn-taking and sharing skills." (Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 01-12-15).

Amy agreed that:

"...social development and interactions with class peers were a positive element during 'Aistear time.'" (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

And as Ella elaborated:

"I see children are more involved and interested in their activities, language and social skills are at a higher level" (Individual Interview, 28-03-14).

Another area of Aistear learning highlighted by the teachers was numeracy development. Ciara enthused that:

"Children are doing maths themselves through different subjects, like using small animals for adding and subtracting and it's all coming from the children themselves." (Ciara, Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15)

Ella and Dawn maintained that numeracy skills had noticeably developed through Aistear. For example, Ella (Classroom Observation Phase 2, 09-11-2015) prepared a Math area to develop children's sequencing skills. Learning through this activity consisted of sequencing, following a pattern, verbal communication, and relationship building. More specifically, children were given the choice to develop their own sequence which allowed for creativity and imagination while developing Maths through objects. Similarly, through her construction activity (Classroom Observation Phase 2, 06-10-2015) Dawn demonstrated the inherent numeracy opportunities of play-based pedagogy through Aistear enhanced children's learning and development. By means of scaffolding, open-ended questioning and demonstrations, Dawn's students worked independently creating a farmyard scene from wooden blocks. Lego and mega-blocks allowed for impactful and effective linguistic and numeracy development.

Literacy and numeracy skills were held to be of great importance by all four teachers. They further concurred that participation in play-based pedagogy developed this skill in all children. All of the teachers voiced an understanding that play-based pedagogy afforded opportunities for oral language and vocabulary development. The use of play to support children's oral language was regarded as particularly significant. The teachers observed that following several weeks spent on a specific theme for the duration of Aistear, the children had become self-assured about the theme, particularly in terms of oral language development.

A few teachers commented that teaching oral language classes through Aistear did not could be undertaken concurrently with the PSC. As Dawn elaborated:

“I try not to do a separate oral language class anymore. I try to include oral language in all areas of children’s learning through all learning stations.” (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

Amy (Classroom Observation Phase 2, 03-10-2015) very much improved her communication skills in terms of herself as ‘farmer’ by fully engaging in the farmers’ market activity through a number of open-ended questions. Specifically, Amy interpolated using positive examples of oral language development through socio-dramatic play, such as:

“What are you going to do?” and *“Why don’t you want the blue rope?”*

All teachers concurred that children’s literacy and numeracy can be reinforced through play. Along with literacy and numeracy skills, the four teachers agreed play-based pedagogy was prerequisite for the development of higher-order thinking skills (Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15). This was very much highlighted by Ella particularly who maintained play-based pedagogy provided children with *“a genuine incentive”* to use such skills (Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15). This was endorsed by Dawn who asserted that:

“...each play session enhanced children’s oral language skills using both literacy and numeracy language without restrictions.” (Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15)

Ella highlighted the significance of drama for children’s learning development:

“The children really learn naturally through role-play and dramatic play. Their imagination is creative and imaginative: huge learning opportunities.” (Ella, Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15)

Ella drew particular attention to *“how play can enhance the self-assurance of the child”* (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15) using the example of a normally subdued child in her class. However, when playing in the socio-dramatic area the subdued child took on the role of the mart owner and began shouting orders to all ‘his staff’. This process was also underlined by Amy’s (Classroom Observation Phase 2, 09-11-2015) use of open-ended questions, such as *“What character are you going to be today?”*, which emboldened the children to debate which roles they wanted to assume. Highly enriched language emerged through the ensuing collaborations and interactions. Since the children felt secure in their chosen roles, significant learning covering many curriculum areas was transacted via their socio-dramatic play.

Teachers perceived play-based pedagogy to be a useful methodology for teaching and learning children in their classes and each held a generally positive attitude toward and

acknowledged Aistear's assistance and encouragement of play-based pedagogy in the infant classroom. Ciara maintained children were supported to be "*challenged*" (Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15), while Dawn underscored the "*potential for every child to be challenged at their personal level*" (Post-focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15). Amy also encouraged the children to think at a "*higher level*" (Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15). All of the teachers interviewed shared a good understanding of play in infant classes and agreed that Aistear had a function in assisting learning through play. In particular, Amy stated:

"I am now linking Aistear more easily to different curriculum areas of the PSC." (Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 01-12-15)

This was reiterated by Dawn who agreed:

"I can see the links between Aistear and the PSC. I feel I have to be more open to the integration of both, but before the training sessions I would not have been as open to linking Aistear with the PSC." (Post-focus Group, Sess 2, 01-12-15)

The four teachers' evaluation of play-based pedagogy for children's learning were consistent with those outlined in the literature on learning and play-based pedagogy. The teachers referred to the developmental opportunities for children through play-based pedagogy; specifically, fine motor skills, applying problem-solving skills, and nurturing autonomy. Children's holistic development was also acknowledged as a significant aspect of Aistear. In fact, the development of critical learning and holistic development were among the most regularly occurring observation of all four participants. Teachers believed holistic learning occurred through play that was versatile enough to accommodate a genuine exploration of life circumstances and remarked that play reinforces children have discoveries of concepts and abilities. As Ella explained

"One day two children were playing 'vets'. The 'vet' asked what was wrong with her dog. She has a lump in her tummy; do you think she is having a baby? ... No, she has a cyst that has to be removed immediately." (Individual Interview, 28-03-2014).

This is an example of a genuine life experience by the child and aligns with Dawn's reference to the "*real experiences*" of children through play (Individual Interview, 01-04-2014). This corresponds with the work of Maria Montessori (1870-1952) who noted the importance of children acquiring knowledge about reality. She considered pretend play natural and believed children developed from adult leadership to allow children to explore the real world through constructed play equipment. All the teachers reported that they strive to plan and organise for developmental opportunities through play for children.

All four teachers agreed that the development of accountability, organisational skills, and autonomy was supported through the use of Aistear. Ciara maintained that accountability for arranging and cleaning up made the children “*more conscious*” that everything has an assigned place in the classroom and inspired them to:

“...take care of their own possessions and to have respect for others belongings” (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

This was very much highlighted when Ciara allocated different roles to children (Classroom Observation Phase 2, 10-11-2015): for example, one child to get paintbrushes and another to get paper plates. Learning to respect others’ belongings and taking care of their own personal possessions was also underlined towards the end of the activity when each child took responsibility for the chore they were assigned. Strategies and connections like these assist children to develop holistically. This not only enables them to assimilate the skills and knowledge they immediately require, but additionally nurtures positive predispositions that will help them in the future. Play encompasses a significant role in the holistic learning and development of children.

Evidence of changes in the teachers’ understandings regarding play-based pedagogy were brought to the fore during the Post-Focus Group Session and organic lesson plans. The importance and implications of the finding was succinctly expressed by Ciara who attested:

“Aistear has really developed children’s participation and contribution in activities...”

Another positive finding was identified by Ella:

“... my confidence is growing and having a lesson guide is also really beneficial to my planning and organising for Aistear in my classroom.”

Amy also noted changes in her approach when implementing Aistear into the PSC:

“I am now linking Aistear more easily to different curriculum areas of the PSC. ... I’m also making links between the new language curriculum and Aistear.”

In commenting on the new language curriculum, Dawn also revealed:

“... the new language curriculum has encouraged me to link elements of Aistear into the language curriculum.”

Following the training sessions it was evident that this professional learning community had united in pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge.

4.2 THEME 2: TEACHERS' ROLE DURING PLAY

Analysis of the data found that teachers' perceptions manipulate practice when they are actively employing play in their classrooms for an hour or less a day. In a play-based classroom the teacher's traditional role changes: as such, some teachers may require a little time to adjust. The various roles assumed through Aistear were identified through teacher observations and interviews.

"I find during Aistear I have to use different vocabulary... open-ended questions... during my teaching of the primary school curriculum, I'm instructing the children on what to do, but when doing Aistear I find it's a different type of teaching... more informal..." (Ella, Individual Interview, 28-03-14)

The teacher and text are no longer regarded as the be-all and end-all of infant classroom learning and the role of the teacher in a play-based classroom is that of a guide. In the wake of the Aistear training sessions Dawn reflected:

"I listen more to the children during their play, sometimes I want to jump in and change things because I would do it differently, but I'm learning that there is no right or wrong way during play, I suppose change my role as a teacher and become an observer or helper." (Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15)

Given that learning to solve problems is one of the main goals of play-based pedagogy, the teacher should not expect children to be effective problem-solvers. Rather, children need to be guided through the searching and solving process. By asking questions along with the children, a teacher can function as a model problem-solver. As children improve at problem-solving, the teacher's involvement can be modified accordingly:

"...I look at things now from a child's perspective rather than constantly giving instructions and moving onto the next topic." (Amy, Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

The prevailing roles assumed by the teacher participants during 'Aistear time' were stage manager, onlooker, play leader, co-player, and evaluator. Coldron and Smith (1999) suggest that being a teacher means being seen by others as a teacher while at the same time continually redefining a teaching identity within the social context of the school.

4.2.1 Stage Manager

In a role of stage manager, teachers can help to provide a theme for the play organised around a set of common experiences or knowledge, and provide sufficient time, space, and props to enhance the play. When in this role Ciara helped a group of boys and girls to prepare props as well as introduce theme ideas. The play theme for the week was 'animals' and the children made tickets/passes to go to the zoo with pieces of coloured paper with the

assistance of Ciara. Prior to the classroom observation below, Kate (a student) asked Ciara how to spell 'burger' and to write it on the coloured ticket (Classroom Observation, Phase 1, 07-04-14). From that then on, all the children began writing what each ticket should represent. A participant in a game adopts a role based on his conception of others' roles. The following classroom observation shows the assistance provided by Ciara as stage manager:

Ciara: *Kate, can I ask what this ticket is for?*
 Kate: *That's a food pass.*
 Ciara: *Ok. What should this ticket be for?*
 Kate: *The restaurant.*
 Ciara: *Restaurant? Will I write 'restaurant'?*
 Ciara: [writes 'restaurant' on coloured paper] *There you are, Kate.*

The stage manager assumed an active role by assisting the child, but nevertheless did not directly interpose the children's play. Ciara offered to write the word 'restaurant' as it was a difficult to spell. The following classroom observation shows Ciara assisting another group of children find the correct piece for a jigsaw of zoo animals. When Ian (a student) asked Claire (a classmate) if he could have the jigsaw piece she was holding in her hand. Claire did not want to leave go. It was at this point that Ciara became involved in the play episode (Classroom Observation, Phase 1, 07-04-14):

Ian: *Claire, give me that piece, I need it.*
 Claire: [pretends not to hear Ian]
 Ian: *Claire, give me that piece. I need it.*
 [noticeably higher voice pitch]
 Ciara: *Are there other pieces, Claire, that you could use?*
Can you share, Claire? It would be good to work together, wouldn't it?
 Claire: *I need this piece.*
 Ciara: *Wouldn't it be good to share? What do we say?; "Sharing is caring".*
 Claire: *I don't want to.*
 Ciara: *Claire, I'll take away the jigsaw and none of you will have it.*
 Claire: *Fine.* [frowning]
 Ciara: *Good girl, Claire, Ian, what do you say?*
 Ian: *Thanks, Claire.*

Ciara continued to turn jigsaw pieces over to see what other animal pieces were remaining. By becoming involved in the above situation Ciara was in a position to assist the play run smoothly and avert potential upsets. Frequent discussions between children and teacher occurred whilst teacher was in stage manager role. These discussions were typically in connection to the play theme of that time, and in most instances were carried into a different circumstance. For example, when one child mentioned that his uncle had a brown cat at the same time as children were locating animals they would find at the zoo, Ciara began a

discussion regarding the various pets children had in their homes or their extended family, whilst arranging the zoo animals.

4.2.2 ONLOOKER

The teachers in this study thought it was imperative for the teacher to be an onlooker during play. The onlooker role is obvious and similar to that played in other areas of the early childhood classroom. In the case of play, teachers must be diligent in terms of whether, when, how, and with whom to intervene:

“I tell the children what stations to go to and then I would walk to each station to see what the children were doing. I tend to...let the children work independently as much as they can, but at times, I would join in the play and ask what they were doing, or if I felt they were struggling or having difficulty I would intervene.” (Amy, Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

Ella agreed:

“I allow the children freedom while they are engaging in an activity, I try to observe them mostly, and if I’m needed they can approach me for assistance. Isn’t Aistear about developing competent and confident learners?” (Individual Interview, 28-03-14)

As the onlooker role accommodates only intermittent intrusion, teachers must derive clues in relation to children’s interests from observing children’s play. The following classroom observation shows Amy in the onlooker role with two children playing at the role-play station (Classroom Observation, Phase 1, 27-03-14):

Ben: What are you making?
Sam: I’m making pasta.
Ben: Pasta?
Amy: That’s interesting.
Sam: Look at it!
Amy: Oh, it looks lovely! It looks very tasty too!

In her role as onlooker, Amy did not get caught up in the children’s play. Nevertheless, she adopted an observer location and appeared to be curious in what the group of children were doing. In this way Amy was able to watch the children’s play, intercede, and adjust role as needed. During this role, Amy observed children’s interactions and verbal communication. In this classroom observation, it was viable to see how Amy without participating in the children’s play was able to discover what the children were doing and at the same time offer encouragement in relation to the children’s play. Some of the functions within this role included Amy’s monitoring children’s play by commenting on it. For example, while observing children’s play Amy was able to find out what the children were doing by observing “*that’s interesting*”.

After that, Amy validating their play with, “*Oh, it looks lovely! It looks very tasty too!*” This role-play was very rich in language and oral communication as children explored how to make pizza and pasta using different kitchen equipment and play-dough. To make the role-play even more realistic, appropriate costumes complimented this scene.

4.2.3 PLAY LEADER

“[The] teacher gives direct suggestions or an explicit demonstration of how to carry out a particular pretend act or type of social interaction” (Griffing, 1982, p.44). As play leader Dawn attempted to encourage children’s play by offering suggestions relating to the book, ‘*If I Built a Car*’ by *Chris Van Dyken* in order to assist their play. During this observation Dawn assumed a minor or identical role to the children during the play. Often the concepts proposed by Dawn were different and appealing to the children and in several situations they were connected to real-life events. Dawn was therefore able to teach certain vocabulary that had been previously exercised by the children. The children and Dawn imagined their chairs were cars as in the story which had just been read to them. They had been playing for a time when Dawn shifted from a co-player role to a play leader role:

Lucy: *We have to go back by the garage so we can go home.*
Dawn: *How long will it take to get back home? I’m starving?*
 Who’s turn is it to cook tonight?
Lucy: *I think it’s my turn.*
Dawn: *Oh great! You’re a very good cook, Lucy.*
Lauren: *Lucy, what will you cook for us?*
Lucy: *Em... chocolate cake with sprinkles.*
Dawn: *My favourite, I love chocolate cake with sprinkles!*
Lauren: *We can all get a big slice each.*

Dawn followed the child’s lead but interjected with an idea that transformed the direction of the play and got the children thinking again. This role was observed most frequently in the socio-dramatic play environment, followed by manipulative pretend play and functional environments (Classroom Observation, Phase 1, 03-04-14). Another classroom observation where the play leader role was adopted again, Dawn encouraged communication and interactions between children. For example, Dawn was playing doctors and nurses with Áine (a student) who was taking an x-ray of Dawn’s hand on a piece of black art paper. After engaging the patient character for a period Dawn asked Áine to take an x-ray of Marie (a classmate), who was also drawing on art paper:

Dawn: *Would you like to do an x-ray of Marie's hand?*
 Áine: *OK, Marie let me x-ray your hand. It won't hurt.*
 Marie: *I don't want to. I'm drawing a picture.*

By asking the child to take an x-ray of Marie's hand Dawn was attempting to enhance communication and interaction between the children. Nevertheless, Marie did not participate (Classroom Observation, Phase 1, 03-04-14).

4.2.4 CO-PLAYER

Amy explained that in order to get involved in the play teachers must sometimes:
"...take on the character, put on various voices and genuinely get absorbed in the play for children to see the teacher enthusiastically taking part in the play." (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

In a similar way Ciara commented that when she interacts with the children during play:
"...they enjoy learning and see you (the teacher) as more approachable" (Individual Interview, 04-04-14).

In this case the teacher takes part in children's play, becomes a co-player, and assumes a minor role. During play, the teacher models play skills, such as peer interactions, and role playing (Johnson, Christie and Wardle 2005). The following Classroom Observation (Phase 1, 31-03-14) presents Ella in the co-player role. A number of children were playing at being in the shoe shop. Ella did not take over the play scene but rather followed the children's lead:

Tom: *Do you want to buy a pair of shoes?*
 Ella: *Yes, I would. Do you have red high heels?*
 Tom: *Sit down., I've to fit your foot. Your foot is big. Em, size 12!*
 Ella: *Are you sure I'm a size 12? that seems very big.*
 Tom: *I'll get you the shoes. I don't have red shoes but I have blue ones.*
 Ella: *I really wanted red ones, but I suppose blue will do.*

In the above classroom observation Ella was very much involved in the socio-dramatic play situation in a minor role; the child lead the play. Ella took an active role and made comments and demands which was part of her character. This role-play activity was built on a real experience as Tom (a student) had actually bought new shoes with his mum for his birthday recently. The above classroom observation shows how the discussion and the free play organically developed between Ella and the child. This co-player role proves how significant the role of play is in developing intellectual and social skills in children. It was also observed that when the teacher ceased engaging as a co-player, children participated in less verbal interactions and the level of social and cognitive play also decreased. When Ella assumed a co-player role with Tom she usually caught the attention of other children who were not

engaging with them, they asked to join the play or tried to get the teacher participate in their play. These behaviours were also apparent when the teacher adopted a stage manager role.

4.2.5 EVALUATOR

Evaluating children's play offers an important tool for teachers to monitor and assess children's progress. Recording children's use of a specific activity or play scenario helps teachers evaluate children's use of time and note their particular interests and /or gaps in their experiences. In this way, teachers can plan a balanced curriculum that speaks to the children's strengths, needs, and interests. Dawn's evaluation methods were "*...observing... brief notes/comments*" (Individual interview, 01-04-14). This chimed with Ciara approach of:

"... observations and notes on particular children's development where issues have arisen..."
(Individual Interview, 04-04-14)

For Amy, evaluation for 'Aistear time' involved:

"...samples of children's work and photographs of their work when evaluating their progress during play." (Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

While Ella's evaluation method included:

"...photos, video-recording and children's work would be used to record their progress...and the amount of movement in the classroom when Aistear is going on...The noise level is another factor to take on board." (Individual Interview, 28-03-14)

Dawn agreed:

"I find it a challenge to observe the large numbers while they are placed at different stations... noise levels are elevated, I find that can be annoying." (Individual Interview, 01-04-14)

When evaluating children's overall learning through play Ella, Dawn and Ciara agreed they noticed an improvement in children's language development.

4.2.6 UNINVOLVED

If teachers do not observe children's play and do not encourage children's play, children cannot engage in play. So why do some teachers not participate in children's play? Sometimes teachers cannot find time to play with children due to other obligations, such as curriculum, time and so on. Another important factor to consider is teachers' personal feelings about the learning viability of play. Teachers who see play as unimportant for children's learning and development may see their role as participant as disruptive. The following classroom observation portrayed Ella in the uninvolved role. As a boy who enjoys to play alone, Alex is reluctant to play with the other children.

Children were enjoying free time play as Ella was putting handouts into each child's plastic folder. Alex was building a Lego dinosaur with Lego and thoroughly engrossed in his creation. All the other children were playing in groups of five or more. Having observed Alex, Ella put the folder on her table, approached him and asked him what he was making. Having explained it was a dinosaur. Ella praised his great work. Robbie (a classmate) was nearby and overheard this exchange. Robbie then approached them, told Alex he had a book about dinosaurs, and asked whether he would like to see it. Ella gradually eased back and left the two boys looking at pictures of dinosaurs in Robbie's book (Classroom Observation, Phase 1, 31-03-14).

4.2.7 DIRECTOR

In the following example Ciara asked David (a student) to join her at the table to practice holding and using a scissors correctly with her:

“Michael I want you to come up here and I'll show you how to hold a scissors correctly.”

In this example Ciara clearly instructed Michael in what to do, thereby restricting Michael's freedom of choice (Classroom Observation, Phase 1, 07-04-2014).

4.2.8 REDIRECTOR

It was also observed in the redirector role that Ciara did not consider children's answers resulting in little opportunity for children's ideas or recommendations. The following highlights this situation. A group of children were pretending to go to the supermarket to buy food for their dinner. They decided to use mega-blocks to represent fruit and vegetables. They set up the stall with orange mega blocks for carrots, green mega blocks for peas and apples, yellow mega blocks for melons and bananas, and so on. In suggesting that she would show them how to draw the above mentioned fruit and vegetables to stick on the stall. Ciara interrupted the children's play and altered their pretend play to a fine-motor art activity. Although the children were practicing their drawing and writing, their cognitive skills through cutting the pictures of the different fruit and vegetables, the necessity for the interruption remains questionable. The children had previously determined their roles and the role of the mega-blocks which demonstrated that they were socially engaged in the pretend play scenario; they were using their imaginations and enjoying the activity. When Ciara interrupted their play, they were immediately disconnected from their pretend play and the opportunity for using their imagination diminished (Classroom Observation, Phase 1, 07-04-14).

4.3 THEME 3: BARRIERS WHEN IMPLEMENTING PLAY

Concerns were noted by the teachers regarding length of time allocated for Aistear during the infant school day, the lack of space for creating learning areas within the classroom, insufficient resources to assist children's play, and the lack of CPD regarding Aistear. These were seen as barriers that may be blocking children's development.

4.3.1 TIME/SPACE/RESOURCES/CPD

Time issues were highlighted by the teachers when implementing Aistear as trying to prepare activities for Aistear proved very time consuming.

"I find it time consuming; it demands lots of work on my part preparing lesson plans." (Amy, Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

This challenge of time issues was also discussed by Dawn and Ella respectively:

"I've a chaotic schedule every day. Trying to find time to prepare for Aistear and set up the room; it's crazy." (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

"How can I blend in all the recommended time allocations for each subject and by some means provide an hour to Aistear play on a daily basis?" (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

Their obvious frustration was echoed by Ciara:

"I try and implement Aistear in my classroom for forty five minutes, three times a week." (Individual Interview, 04-04-14)

Lack of space compounded the time issues encountered by the teachers. They talked about the amount of preparation required for Aistear to work successfully and a great deal of this was connected to organising and creating resources within a small area of the classrooms:

"The organisation takes up so much of my time." (Dawn, Individual Interview, 01-04-14)

"I find when setting up the different stations...you need lots more equipment and resources." (Ella, Individual interview, 28-03-14)

This exasperation was clear from Ciara's comment:

"What more is required of us? Do the PSC; Aistear; organise resources; prepare stations: it just goes on and on..." (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15).

While teachers were extremely optimistic regarding Aistear, they seemed overwhelmed by the amount of preparation entailed in arranging Aistear in the infant classroom:

"I find it time-consuming. It demands lots of work on my part preparing lesson plans... I think you have to be prepared; you have to spend time planning on what you are going to teach the children and what resources are required." (Amy, Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

Dawn observed that her Principal had purchased:

“...lots of new play-material, for the ‘Aistear hour’ only” (Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15).

Indeed, all the teachers had huge concerns around storage space for the Aistear equipment:

“...Limited space setting up five different stations and limited resources to put into these stations “My wish is having a really resourced classroom. That is very important to me. I have resources but I would love to have lots more and proper space to store them.” (Amy, Individual interview, 25-03-14)

“Resources, resources, resources. Need I say anymore?” (Ella, Individual Interview, 28-03-14)

“Space, storage space, resources..” (Dawn, Individual Interview, 01-04-14)

Another obstacle to implementing Aistear was the severe shortage of classroom space as highlighted by Amy:

“I’ve thirty boys in the classroom as well as furniture and equipment. Where to store resources is an absolute nightmare!” (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

These findings clearly indicate that teachers felt the lack of appropriate resources impeded the proper implementation of Aistear.

“...it takes quite an amount of planning and wondering is this actually going to work? What do I want them to learn/ I find you have to be creative in your thinking. Sometimes I don’t have the time for it; I have other subjects to teach also” (Ella, Individual Interview, 28-03-14).

Ciara also admitted:

“Planning is still an issue for me. I am trying to integrate both but it’s still time consuming.” (Post-Focus Group, Sess 2, 02-12-15)

On the other hand, Amy felt that:

“...if another adult was present in the classroom to help out between the different stations, extra support in the classroom would be of huge benefit to me” (Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

Indeed, as Dawn remarked:

“...having thirty-four junior infants is chaotic at the best of times...implementing play has its problems...” (Individual Interview, 01-04-14)

All teachers underwent formal Aistear training at an education centre. Nonetheless some teachers expressed subsequent feelings of confusion and difficulty around the pedagogy.

“I was told to do an Aistear course outside of school time and then come back to the classroom and implement what we had learnt.” (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15).

Moreover, the teachers did not consider the training to be realistic or practical. Amy and Ella, the two teachers in this study who qualified since 2009, agreed that:

“...teacher education in Aistear and infant education was not practical.” (Pre-focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

While Dawn and Ciara conceded:

“...it was hard to remember the impact early years modules had on them in their training.” (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

In relation to the training sessions with the four teachers, Amy noted:

“Since the training sessions I have found the themed schedule really useful to follow, but it’s still time consuming organising resources.” (Post-Focus Group Sess 2, 02-12-15)

Similarly, Amy and Dawn felt:

“...having gone through this experience I’m now more confident in my thinking and creativity. I also feel I have support with the other teachers to keep in touch and talk about what’s working and not; a support network.” (Post-Focus Group Sess 2, 02-12-15)

Teachers felt a formal way of teaching was essential to infant classes; thus revealing problems infant teachers may experience in shifting towards a child-led attitude. Ella explained:

“...how ‘Aistear time’ is now flowing and finds the themes for play template really good to guide planning and organisation of ‘Aistear time’.” (Post-Focus Group Sess 2, 02-12-15).

This is particularly important when bearing in mind that practice in infant classrooms has not transformed adequately, derived from data highlighted in this study in spite of the introduction of Aistear and the research that supports it.

4.4 INTEGRATING AISTEAR WITH THE PSC

Regardless of the importance these teachers placed on play, they nonetheless that they now had to follow two distinct curriculums: formal versus informal/‘Aistear Time’. The teachers reported that different teaching imperatives are not only antithetical to each other, but occasionally conflict with their own teaching philosophies. The integration of methodologies recommended in Aistear and the learning objectives of the PSC was found extremely problematic. In light of this, Ciara resorted to separate implementation:

“...two really: the primary school curriculum (1999) and Aistear (2006). I use both, but separately.” (Individual Interview, 04-04-14)

Most of the teachers further conceded that although they were aware of the themes and principles steering Aistear, they had insignificant knowledge on how to achieve them. In fact, Ciara described them as *“time consuming”* (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15); Amy confessed that there was *“way too much to take in”* (Individual Interview, 25-03-14); Dawn called for an *“Aistear for Dummies!”* manual (Individual Interview, 01-04-14); and Ella complained *“there’s too much going on before I even get started”* (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15). The teachers criticised the volume of information obtaining to other settings such as crèches and play schools, and the unrealistic exemplars for infant class teachers within the Aistear guidelines handbook. Both Amy and Ella found the Aistear handbook overwhelming:

“...it covered childcare facilities, preschools; but nothing practical or realistic about preparing the infant class for a theme or pointers on what resources to be used.”(Amy, Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

“I feel I’m working with two curriculums; Aistear, I feel, is more focused on crèches” (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-15)

Teachers cited difficulties when integrating Aistear with the PSC, emphasising Aistear as informal whereas the PSC is formal. This educed a clear perception the stiltedness of the infant curriculum. As Amy explained:

“I’m trying to link Aistear to the primary school curriculum through my lesson plans. ...I find it time consuming. It demands lots of work on my part preparing lesson plans... how to make the link...” (Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

Dawn agreed:

“The primary school curriculum, in my opinion, is still a very structured, formal approach to teaching. Aistear advocates learning through play while integrating with the primary school curriculum. My issue is, how can we do Aistear for one hour each day and then go back to formal teaching? It’s hard to fuse the two curriculums together as one.” (Individual Interview, 01-04-14)

Ella echoes these sentiments, adding:

“I can see the benefits of Aistear, it’s just the combining of the two curriculums into one, that’s where I have issues” and “...we have been teaching education throughout the years, isn’t it, formal education.” (Individual Interview, 28-03-14)

All of the teachers were implementing Aistear to some extent in their classroom, all were achieving this mostly through an hour or less of play. Some teachers were only implementing Aistear two-three times a week while others were using Aistear every day for forty to forty-five minutes. Despite various issues the teachers implemented Aistear but in a variety of local configurations:

“It’s not possible to find a full hour for Aistear, it could be thirty minutes” (Amy, Individual Interview, 25-03-14).

“I do Aistear four days a week for half an hour.” (Ella, Individual Interview, 28-03-14)

“How can we do Aistear for one hour each day and then go back to formal teaching?” (Dawn, Individual interview, 01-04-14)

“I use both but separately; Aistear is used three days a week for roughly forty-five minutes...” (Ciara, Individual interview, 01-04-14)

As a result, there was a clear differential in children’s opportunities to discover during play. Although by and large teachers recognised the importance of Aistear, an hour or less for play was generally all they could afford in the day. As Dawn observed:

“...the school day for infant level students was short enough without scheduling an hour for play” (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 01-10-14).

Since the significance of child-led play is reinforced by the Aistear framework (NCCA, 2009), the teachers explained their efforts to implement the pedagogy. Amy said:

“I tend to... let the children work independently as much as they can... it’s really knowing when to intervene.” (Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

Conversely, Dawn had her students create a table display with different items found on a farm (Classroom Observation Phase 2, 10-11-2015). As part of the task, she gave very clear instructions on what to do at the construction area. From the activity she noticed how two girls in particular engaged extremely well together creating an imaginative farm table display. Since they worked so well together, she allowed the two children to take control of the activity and did not intervene. Likewise, Ella stated:

“I allow the children freedom while they are engaging in an activity... if I’m needed they can approach me for assistance” (Individual Interview, 28-03-14)

By contrast, Dawn asserted:

“Engaging in their play is basically spending a few minutes at each station.” (Individual Interview, 01-04-14)

Ciara also said:

“I observe them, sometimes ask questions about their work, or just give praise and a smile.” (Individual Interview, 04-04-14).

Nonetheless, the four teachers signified that they were generally sticking to the method recommended at the Aistear training sessions conducted at the independent education stations with a group of children at each station. All four teachers used their discretion when arranging diverse play-stations, and all operated five play-stations although the duration of

Aistear differed in length in all classrooms. Amy set up an “art and craft” station in preference to a “creative play” station; Ella named a “socio-dramatic” station as opposed to a “role-play” station. Dawn and Ciara did not name stations they used in their classrooms during any of the individual interview sessions. All teachers agreed that Aistear time regularly concluded with tidy-up time of materials and a reflection of what learning took place. A noticeable pattern in this study was the amount of times curriculum integration was mentioned by the teachers. They believed learning through the majority of subjects could be integrated through play, but it was difficult and very time consuming:

“I find it time consuming, it demands lots of work on my part preparing lesson plans,...how to make the link and also sourcing resources all takes time” (Amy, Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

“It’s hard to fuse the two curriculums together as one.” (Dawn, Individual Interview, 01-04-14)

Teachers believed they were more capable of incorporating curricular areas in particular drama through Aistear. Amy and Ella believed that socio-dramatic play took place effortlessly as they discussed about a “socio-dramatic” station at different stages during interviews and focus group sessions. Throughout Classroom Observations Phases 1 and 2 Dawn and Ciara also had a “socio-dramatic”/“role-play” station positioned in their classrooms. While the teachers were mainly positive regarding ‘Aistear time’ integration of particular areas of the PSC, they nonetheless maintained that some formal pedagogy was needed for teaching infants. As Amy put it:

“I’m saying there’s room for a mixture of both teaching methods; it’s just understanding how to integrate both into the classroom at the same time.” (Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

Ella agreed that:

“...children learn both using a formal and non-formal approach. Which is the best approach, I don’t know. I suppose a bit of both... you need structure in your class... children sitting down listening to the instructions and working in a controlled environment.” (Individual Interview, 28-03-14).

Dawn also found that *“using both approaches allow children to learn”* (Individual Interview, 01-04-14), while Ciara was of the opinion that:

“...they learn using a formal approach-they learn both ways.” (Individual interview, 04-04-14)

The above comments highlight the discrepancy between learning and teaching in infant classes, in that the teachers appreciated play as a learning tool, but believed formal learning was essential to achieve curriculum objectives.

Moreover, Ciara felt:

“Aistear is supposed to be informal and the PSC is very structured. How can you integrate the two? I think it’s giving children mixed messages - freedom for an hour of Aistear and back to formal education for the remainder of the day.” (Pre-Focus Group, Sess 1, 1-10-14)

Teachers additionally conceded that the induction of Aistear in their classroom during the hour of play frequently called ‘Aistear time’ made them understand the importance of play for children. Ella explained play as “...*a positive thing*” (Individual Interview, 28-3-14) and Ciara maintained:

“... it’s a positive element, for me and the children. It’s a different way of teaching but an enjoyable way of learning.” (Individual Interview, 04-04-14)

Amy also reported the ‘Aistear hour’ to be enjoyable as

“...children are in charge of their own learning through play and I have seen changes in some of the children who could normally be disruptive during a structured lesson... much more involved in their play episode, and also interacting in a more positive manner with their peers.” (Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

The four participant teachers generally believed that play, and especially ‘Aistear time’, engaged children in group work and taught them about turn-taking. The teachers also mentioned how active children were throughout play time and how play allowed them the chance to investigate and discover. In addition the children were physically and cognitively active. In Dawn’s class, for instance three children became very motivated in setting up a pet shop; as such, they spent time placing animals in order of sizes: small, medium, and large. They then decided they would put the animals in order of their colour. As the activity continued, the children had to decide on what characters they were going to be (Reflective Diary, 24-11-2015). The pleasure and commitment of the children during the ‘Aistear time’ was also discussed by all teachers. Ella observed:

“.. the children are happy and excited when we are doing Aistear. I look at children as children; sometimes we forget that they are only four and five years of age.” (Individual Interview, 28-03-14)

The teachers agreed that when the children are enjoying themselves they are not aware they are in the process of learning. As Amy put it:

“...the children all love ‘Aistear time’...it’s fun. During play the children don’t realise how much they are learning themselves.” (Individual Interview, 25-03-14)

4.5 SUMMARY

The Aistear early years' curriculum framework sought to complement and extend the PSC at infant class level in the Republic of Ireland. While Aistear focuses on the development of children through play-based pedagogy, the PSC centres on the acquisition of subject-based knowledge and the development of age-appropriate skills. Teacher understandings regarding the status of Aistear in comparison with the PSC to identify everyday practices in the classroom were therefore explored. Acknowledging the importance of play, there was some evidence that Aistear has changed classroom teaching. However, didactic teaching approaches remain dominant, with play afforded non-essential status.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

‘The playing adult steps sideward into another reality; the playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery’

Erik H. Erikson

5.0 INTRODUCTION

The present study sought to learn about and to explore infant teacher understandings about play-based pedagogy in their classrooms. The discussion is framed by the research question and definitions which established the focus of the research. The overarching research question guiding the study is:

What are infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy within the Irish context?

The sub-questions associated with this overarching question are:

- What were infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy?
- What was the role of the infant teachers during Aistear?
- What potential barriers transpired when implementing Aistear?
- How could Aistear be used as an instrument to integrate with the PSC?

These research questions were pursued through an interpretative process enacted through various methods which included a thorough, six-step analysis. These have been fully outlined in Chapter Three to ensure transparency. The major contribution of this study is that it provides broadly-based information about teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy in infant classes. This is significant in light of current initiatives, both at practice and policy level, to introduce play-based pedagogy into infant classes of primary schools. This research has the potential to inform initial teacher education and CPD on the development of play-based pedagogy in infant classes, in addition to contributing to the resources available to teachers to guide practice. In particular, the insights provided by this research will allow for CPD to address those issues which have been identified as significant for teachers in

changing their practice. There are considerable similarities between the findings of this study and other studies cited in the literature on play-based pedagogy in classrooms, particularly in relation to teacher understandings; role of the teacher; barriers of time, class size and space; and integration of Aistear with the PSC. The chapter will therefore begin by addressing the elements which constitute teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy in infant classes. This will be followed by a discussion on various teacher roles during play and barriers of implementing play in infant classes. Finally, the integration of Aistear with the PSC will be considered.

Teachers of young children have a right to have their voices heard about what they understand and have experienced regarding play. A significant part of this study was to give the teachers the opportunity to be heard on their understandings concerning play-based pedagogy in infant classes. During the literature review it became clear that little research has been undertaken on infant teacher understandings of play. Each teacher was enthusiastic and keen to share stories and was very engaged during the interview process, focus group sessions, observations and training sessions. Teachers welcomed the interview, focus group and training sessions as a time to talk about and to discuss their understandings of the topic. Subsequent to each interview, focus group or training sessions, I took the opportunity to reflect on the individual teacher, reread transcripts, and make additional notes that seemed significant to the teacher since Connelly and Clandinin (1990) particularly stress the importance of the researcher and participant feeling connected.

The findings of this research confirm that infant teachers have confidence in play-based pedagogy which is developmentally appropriate to infant classrooms. Nevertheless, there is a clear disconnect between theory and practice in the infant classroom setting.

5.1 TEACHER UNDERSTANDINGS OF PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY

Each teacher asserted that play was the infrastructure for learning in the infant classroom. Highly-trained teachers have strong convictions which inevitably play impact the infant classroom, and the teachers of this study agreed with those findings. The teachers at different levels included play in their everyday school timetable, and all stated it was their objective to make learning fun for the students. They concluded that providing the opportunity for play made learning meaningful to children.

When a child is purposefully engaged in play, it helps to develop fine and gross motor, social, and cognitive skills, and provides problem-solving opportunities. Most teachers had a broad understanding of play-based pedagogy. The findings demonstrated that the teacher these were not about strictly about play per se but rather the relationships they made with play. There was no evidence of widespread negative outlooks towards play-based pedagogy; there was evidence of positive understandings to play as a worthwhile experience and valuable for children's learning.

The ecology of human development is important for play since play is an activity wherein the child is active and plays a part in creating relationships with other people (teacher/child and child/other children. Bronfenbrenner's theory supports the significance of cultivating positive relationships with children, and suggests that the manner in which teachers interact with and support children impinges on their development. Relationships in this study were examined through the mesosystem; the communications and processes which occur in the infant classroom, such as relationship with the teacher. Bronfenbrenner's model is deemed significant in the arena of children's development, especially in drawing attention to the importance of examining children within context (Hayes and Kernan, 2008) and in recognising that the child can both modify their environments and be fashioned by them. "By looking at the systems that affect individuals in and beyond the family, ecological approach shows the interrelated influences on child development" (Papalia *et al.*, 1998, p.15). Bronfenbrenner's microsystem was foregrounded here as the most instantaneous environment for the child, which in this study was the infant classroom. It involved the associations and communications children had in their direct environment.

Play is developmentally appropriate for all primary-age children and can afford occasions that enhance the learning experience (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). O'Kane (2007) and Moloney (2011) considered the potential for Aistear to assist a play-based approach in infant classes. Play is an indispensable part of development and learning for children and is an increasingly significant element of creative methods to learning and teaching in primary education (Briggs and Hansen, 2012). O'Connor and Angus (2012) maintain the philosophy necessary to teach infant classes varies significantly to teaching senior primary school children. Certainly, a great deal of literature purports that teaching and learning during play in the early years is valuable to young children (Walsh *et al.*, 2011; Stephen, 2006).

In accordance with the literature, these teachers believed Aistear could assist the development new knowledge between all curricular subjects, eventually encouraging learning in an integrated manner. Nonetheless, these understandings were constrained by challenges to implementation. Negative understandings towards introducing play into the classroom materialised in a myriad of ways. These negative understandings reflected a lack of confidence, lack of experience, and were coupled with apprehension, hesitation, and nervousness. There were some instances in which teachers were eager to try play-based pedagogy. It cannot be assumed that the teachers who felt intimidated by changes in their teaching would develop positive understandings towards play-based pedagogy in the classroom; alternatively, those who feel positively and approvingly inclined towards play could be perceived as a resource amongst the teaching profession, and one which could be developed as a scaffold for infant teachers. Riojas-Cortez and Flores (2009) recognised these complexities and contradictions in understandings amongst teachers, but highlighted the importance of resolving them in order to better support modification in teaching practice. In general, the teachers' outlook towards the implementation of play in the infant classroom could be identified as scepticism regarding the implications of such modification.

The study found that rather than Aistear being understood as a flexible framework, it was understood as something separate from the PSC to be carried out within a particular time. Disparities were also identified between the teachers' descriptions of the pedagogical approaches observed in their classrooms. While the teachers in all the schools acknowledged the importance of play in enhancing children's learning experiences, they sometimes felt it easier to sit them down and teach them formally.

In the infant classroom, play was important predominantly applied for social and language learning. This aligns with Vygotsky who "believed that social interaction was a great influence on the development of self and was the origin of higher critical learning" (Woolfolke and Perry, 2012, p.42). Findings from this study show how Aistear was implemented within the new primary language curriculum differed according to individual teacher understandings and practices and the particular context within which the learning was taking place. The new primary language curriculum presents a significant opportunity for teachers to explore how Aistear can support the new curriculum and positively impact children's learning experiences. The four themes of Aistear, namely, well-being, identity and belonging, communicating, and exploring and thinking, provide a flexible framework that

facilitates the integration of subjects across the curriculum (NCCA, 2009). The findings from this study show a lack of understanding of how the four themes of Aistear frame the PSC (1999). Although language learning is a fundamental element of the PSC and is assigned the longest time niche in the recommended minimum weekly time framework (DES, 1999b, p.70), social learning in SPHE is assigned the shortest time niche of the eleven subjects in the PSC. A considerable element of the learning for which the teachers appreciate play is not a curriculum priority, and this is one instance of the detachment between the PSC (DES, 1999a) and Aistear in the infant classroom. The teachers regard play as a site of children's agency. Agency is reflected through the data as confident, competent children developing their imagination and creativity, being both occupied and individually invested in their play as a significant component of their lives. While children demonstrated active agency during play, the teachers had to first establish control of the classroom before the children were allowed to play.

Also, the teachers expressed misgivings that their ability to wield control would get in the way of children's agency; a justifiable fear as the literature suggests that teachers find it hard to come to terms with child-led play and have issues concerning loss of control (Walsh and Gardner, 2006). An important issue is that teachers are worried that providing play in the infant classroom underestimates their professional standards. Walsh and Gardner (2006) hypothesised that teachers in their study were unwilling to alter their roles to be compatible with play-based pedagogy as they were worried of the potential erosion of their perceived professionalism. The findings from this study support that hypothesis. There is no one approach to the study of teacher understandings regarding play. In the literature sourced and reviewed in Chapter Two, some investigated the understandings of teachers who were recognised as providing play opportunities in the classroom (Brett *et al.*, 2002; Bennett *et al.*, 1997) and others who were not doing so (Riojas-Cortez and Flores, 2009). Critical to effective pedagogy is ECE teacher appreciation of children's learning and developmental theories and how that understanding is applied in practice, but in addition how the practice is informed by teachers' beliefs, values and understandings (Nutbrown, 2018). In an average day, children in a number of American full-day kindergartens, frequently spend approximately two to three hours each day doing math and literacy teaching and getting ready for tests, and only thirty minutes taking part in free play or 'choice time' (Miller and Almon, 2009). Miller and Almon (2009) further report that in numerous kindergarten classrooms play has been replaced by a prescriptive curriculum that directly connects to national education

standards and assessments (2009). The literature (Ailwood, 2003, p.291) verifies that play in lots of early childhood settings are “repetitive, often isolating and recreational rather than educational”.

While there is no reference in the literature reviewed for this study to play being a risk to teachers, the understandings identified through this study uphold certain aspects of the literature. Teachers in this research study worked in diverse schools with variations in conditions and school structures. There were few differences in understandings between the teachers implementing play-based pedagogy opportunities for children in their infant classrooms resonate with research which suggests that it is not infant classroom, school or policy contexts that are the formative elements in play provision, but teacher understandings (Kemple, 1996).

5.2 TEACHERS’ ROLE DURING PLAY

All the teachers were asked to explain their roles during play. Findings from observation showed that teachers play more roles in practice than they reported. The similarity between their roles in play is that all the teachers assume a diversity of such roles. These include stage manager, onlooker, play leader, co-player, evaluator, uninvolved, director, and redirector role. Findings reveal a common outlook amongst the teachers which emphasises their role of stage manager in play. All teachers explained that as stage manager they would pick a theme for each week and try and incorporate a lesson plan on that theme. Rather than emphasising children’s free and autonomous play, the teachers provide teacher-guided structured play. As stage manager, teachers control the whole play process. For example, they start with lining up children to the different play areas, introduce them to the play, and demonstrated how to play. Almost all the teachers were of the opinion that they need to assist children in play. Johnson, Christie, and Wardle (2005, p.273) claim “adults often switch to this role when children have difficulty getting play started on their own or when an ongoing play episode is beginning to falter.” Undeniably, the role of the adult is fundamental to children’s play and how adults interpret their role in that play is critical. According to Mead (1934) interactions with significant others outline the sense of self by giving the child information about how significant others view himself/herself, which is then incorporated into their self-concept. Accordingly, Jerome *et al* (2015) discourse upon the roles of teachers as implementers, collaborative agents, and change agents.

These intricate roles require substantial professional development, training initiatives at government level, and support at school level, if teachers are to be equipped to perform them. Vygotsky endorses the significance of the role of adults involved in children's learning and play. He argued that the attainment of educational value and development of children's play mainly rely on the leadership of adults. His view of early childhood education suggested that it is necessary for adults to take active roles in children's play if its learning potential is to be capitalised. This is consistent with a large amount of research regarding the role of the adult. Pickett (2005) claimed that positive participation from teachers was necessary to guarantee deep-level learning to take place for the duration of this time. Playful communications with children offer the teacher the opening to be helpful by exercising methods for instance modelling, questioning, and instructing. Wood and Attfield (2005, p.183) talked of the magnitude of appreciating "the flow and spirit of the play." A significant amount of research proposes that controlling and leading children's play is unfavourable to develop play. Research promotes a stimulating environment which allows play add to the complete learning events of the child (Hayes, 2012; Walsh *et al.*, 2011; Logue and Detour, 2011; Pickett, 2005; Dunkin and Hanna, 2001). This is consistent with research conducted by Grugeon *et al* (2001) who posit that the role of the adult throughout play is to assist and enhance children's knowledge of language and to support the development of children's language abilities.

All the teachers shared the viewpoint that the role of observer is essential for the achievement of play. They indicated that the main aims of observing include identifying children's creative way of playing then imparting and communicating it with other children; observing their functioning in play to recognise their needs and propose suitable support; and observing children's interest to make any necessary modifications. Another role identified in this research was the role of observer. In their distinguished research in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom, McGuinness (2014) and Moyles *et al* (2002), established that teachers had complexities when evaluating end results of play as a result of difficulties connected with early learning. Whilst the research proposes teachers have difficulties evaluating learning during play, all teachers in this study acknowledged they found assessment difficult and time consuming. In her work Dunphy (2008) explicitly states that "play is a key part of children's learning and development and thus an important part of the assessment process" (Dunphy, 2008, p.4). The observer role shows the importance of observing children during play activities, especially children who have issues or concerns, for example the classroom observation of Alex not socialising with his classmates.

Teachers need to show children how their play is significant by observing and questioning their play and by planning the environment they are playing in. The play leader role involves preparing children with relevant experience which is essential for play, volunteering assistance when children encounter difficulties during play, and providing emotional support when children are not capable of playing independently. Some teachers identified with the role of facilitator which entails the accountability of teaching children how to play, questioning them to motivate and scaffold learning, thinking and imagination, involving children in play, encouraging, leading and extending play. As facilitators, teachers are more involved in play as they must understand what is happening during the play, and go directly into the play to suggest ideas to guide play.

Findings show that the co-player is a further role valued by the participating teachers. It is clear that generally teachers hold a positive view concerning their participation in children's play. Three of the teachers explained that they participate in play either when invited by children or proactively join in by themselves. Their explanation draws attention to the different motivations for them to assume this role. Teachers variously attested to using this role as an approach to shape certain action or skill for children, draw out children's interest, and/or to create a close teacher-children relationship. The interview data revealed some teachers prefer to step back and provide the opportunity for children themselves to lead and control play as they feel teacher participation may interrupt children's play, distract their attention, and disrupt improvisation. However, it appears that most teachers share the view that their active involvement may develop children's learning through play. Across the observations, only one teacher did not intervene in the children's play. Instead, she prepared paper work for the next session of formal teaching activities.

A play curriculum inherently acknowledges the inseparability of emotion and cognition and of care and education and appreciates the bio-ecological context in which both are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Furthermore, Pramling-Samuelsson and Sheridan (2009) argue the national curriculum and school-based curriculum as influences in teachers' interpretations of the value of children's play when carrying out research in five Sweden preschools. Two outside influences which hinder practitioners' efforts to provide playful learning opportunities to children in the classroom are the top-down pressure of the primary school curriculum. It is the curriculum that continually infiltrates into teachers' practices. Shen (2008) conducted a study on qualities influencing teachers' beliefs and implementation

of play by interviewing eleven Taiwan preschool teachers and saw that there are primarily two different elements that influence the status of play in early childhood educational practice: intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The extrinsic factors include school environment, teachers' professional development, supportive leaders, a cooperative administrative team, school-based curriculum, and the support from the parents and the community (p.275). Bronfenbrenner claimed that "child development takes place through processes of progressively more complex interaction between an active child and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended period of time" (Bronfenbrenner, 1998, p.996).

By analysing teacher-child interactions in play, the teachers appear less sensitive to interactions than children do, and assume more authority in their interactions with children. The teacher-initiated interactions reflect a common desire of teachers to direct children's learning in play. From the teacher-initiated interactions, it appears that the teachers prefer to guide children directly than to question, challenge and communicate with them to create opportunities to strengthen their competencies. The current study highlights infant teacher understandings of their role in children's play. It shows that the teachers from different infant classes understood their roles in children's play differently. From the roles that teachers perceived and employed in children's play, the researcher argues that the participating teachers' roles still exhibit an overall number of didactic features. Through thorough planning, organising, and monitoring, teachers exert control over children's play. They concentrate more on how to teach children how to play, and use play to achieve specific learning objectives. As such, most play is highly structured, and children are less empowered to play freely. Even though the didactic features are noticeable in observation, the current research concludes that the pattern of teacher-child interactions is shifting from a teacher-child relationship to a more parallel relationship.

5.3 BARRIERS WHEN IMPLEMENTING PLAY

Although infant teachers involvement regarding the value of play is very significant, various barriers have been highlighted which hinder the successful employment of play in infant classes. Murphy (2004) emphasised Irish teachers' negative attitude towards the application of new and creative teaching methodologies. Findings from this study revealed that each of the four teachers confronted barriers in delivering Aistear which deterred

and/prevented them from employing Aistear to its full capacity. The influences from an institutional context can be seen in the structure of the school or infant classroom; for example, the demands of curriculum, the provision of time, space to provide for children's play, teacher-children ratio, the arrangement of daily routines, the availability of resources, facilities, and the possible opportunities for teachers' professional development concerning play-based pedagogy. This echoes Wood and Bennet (2001) who underscore time limitations and the current curriculum as obstructing the efficient use of play by Irish infant teachers. Kagan (1990) indicated that the space and material available in a kindergarten influence the forms and ways of play. For example, too few materials may impose restrictions on accessibility to children while too many materials may lead to fewer social games and ready-made materials may inhibit creativity. As Sandseter (2009) pointed out, the features and qualities of the play environment which are provided by teachers influence the nature and experience of children's play. No teacher found implementing Aistear straightforward. Interestingly, all four teachers made reference to lack of space as an impediment to implementing Aistear. "The adult has a responsibility to provide rich environments where children are able to explore, touch, manipulate and experiment with different materials" (Smith, Cowie and Blades, 2005, p.413) and where children can ask questions, make hypothesis and form new ideas. The physical environment is a direct image of the teacher's planning and the student's learning. It is where both teachers and students will spend most of their time and a place they can call their own and relate to. It should be well organised, comfortable, and personable and offer a variety of possibilities for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Catron and Allen, 2007). Bronfenbrenner identified how the intrinsic qualities of a child and his environment combine to influence how he will grow and develop. Plowman and Stephen (2007) discuss the magnitude of self-selected activities with adult leadership. Likewise, Mead (1934) maintained that while play should be prepared by a teacher with an incentive to develop learning, it should be unregimented and not over disciplined by the teacher.

Another main concern for the teachers were the resources required for Aistear, and they reported a shortage of resources, little financial support for resources, and storage issues as key obstacles to implementation in the infant classroom. Ireland is in a similar position with the challenge of providing sufficient resources when a new methodology to learning takes form. Teachers felt that resources were not accessible or too costly and stressed that lack of resources are a major impediment to developing play-based pedagogy.

Murphy's (2004) research concerning play in infant classrooms proportionate to the 1999 Revised Curriculum cited many obstacles to reinforcing play and play-based pedagogy in infant classrooms. Most particularly, the inadequate provision and assortment of equipment, toys and resources was a concern in several infant classrooms. Amazingly, this still seems to be an issue in 2019, even following the establishment of Aistear. A study in Dublin city exposed a number of factors infant teachers believed could facilitate the implementation of the 1971 curriculum (INTO, 1984). Positioned in order of significance, enhancement of child/adult ratio emerged as the greatest prevalent factor. Next was the development of the infant cycle to a three year cycle or otherwise establish a pre-infant year. The third and fourth factors were related to adequate materials and in-service courses (INTO, 1984). In spite of this study being thirty-five years old, issues of ratio, satisfactory materials, and the need for training still prevail in the infant classrooms of Ireland (DES, 2010; INTO, 2006; Murphy, 2006). Bronfenbrenner's work is significant in proposing a systematic approach to human and social development. His theory is imperative for educators since it facilitates the construction of fundamental relationships with their students and fosters a communication-rich classroom environment.

It is suggested that the number of children in infant classes should be capped at a maximum of 20 children, or to 15 within classes of different levels or disadvantaged areas (INTO, 2006). Moreover, INTO's (2006) stance on a play-based pedagogy was that it is impossible for one adult to successfully conduct a classroom in which language is a fundamental ingredient. Therefore, it recommends that a qualified child care worker be allocated to every infant classroom (INTO, 2006). Comparable findings have been recognised in Northern Ireland (Walsh and Gardner, 2006). One of the issues implementing a play-based pedagogy is that the teacher works with no support of an additional adult. As well as providing a realistic adult/child ratio in the classroom, offering resources, equipment and suitable facilities are also necessary to implement and support a play-based curriculum (INTO, 2006). The child/adult ratio of one adult to 25 children found in primary classrooms in Scotland was confirmed to be challenging. Teachers voiced their concerns that acquiring information in the primary school environment may perhaps not be as sensitive to the individual needs of children. Classrooms may be seen as ecological systems wherein there is continuous interaction of the environment and its citizens. As such, a classroom would be construed by Bronfenbrenner as one of the microsystems wherein a child's life is embedded. In addition to having the defining qualities of a system, classrooms also have very clear

properties which must be acknowledged if their potential influence on the individuals within them is to be comprehended. The microsystem of the classroom and the classroom and teacher factors which play a part to learning, Bronfenbrenner's social ecological model (1979) reveals that components at various complex levels have an influence on classroom behaviour and learning.

Since other barriers faced by teachers link to potential misunderstandings concerning play, work and learning, training may be a valuable ingredient to offer (Moyles, 2010). Nevertheless, the content of this training is essential, as determined from the perception of a teacher in Moyles' study who affirmed that teachers are "trained" however they ought to be "educated" to understand why play-based pedagogy to learning are essential, or on the other hand how learning is an result of play (Moyles, 2010, p. 4). The why, what, and how, of play-based pedagogy should be attended to at initial and in-service training courses. Likewise, Taylor *et al* (2004) highlighted the significance of teacher training in early childhood education. Results of this study support the growing acceptance of offering teachers effective CPD opportunities where learning is allied and logical (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999) ensuing in the development of what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) consider professional capital. It has been recommended that newly qualified teachers join together as a community of professionals who are dedicated to their work and competent of executing it (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

It is my opinion that the role of the teacher consists of a willing learner more than highly skilled supplier of information. The role of children and teacher would fundamentally trickle into this training when assessing the 'how' area. It is well documented that an advanced level of ability and skill are required from the adult when the attitude to learning incorporates both adult-directed learning experiences with child self-initiated learning experiences (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002; Moyles, Adams and Musgrove, 2002). However, it has been suggested that although teachers supported the capacity of play in terms of children's education, they regularly underwent problems with understanding their role (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002; Moyles, Adams and Musgrove, 2002). This highlights the need for further in-service training for teachers and accords with previous research findings which establish that trainee primary school teachers routinely receive limited or no preparation in early years' education (OECD 2006; Murphy 2004).

Bronfenbrenner's theory has had a huge impact on educational policy and practice especially in early childhood. Fine-Davis (2007) claimed Irish infant classrooms were not appropriate regarding the requirements of four and five year old children; mainly as infant teachers were implementing a broad curriculum and large teacher-pupil ratios.

Murphy's (2004) research suggested teachers gave minimal consideration to the organisation of play in their classroom. The teachers in this study generally used adaptations of very similar stations used at the education centre. These five stations comprised art and craft station; role-play station; construction play station; socio-dramatic station; and small world station. These are founded on three particular types of play as portrayed in the Aistear guidelines: namely, physical play; creative play; and pretend play (NCCA, 2009). Each of the teachers had particular sections prepared throughout the classroom to assist these stations. This confirms that from the time Aistear was published in 2009, teachers were employing a play-based pedagogy in infant classes at different degrees. Nevertheless, the amount of preparation for Aistear in teachers' personal time was definitely an issue. The implementation of Aistear had some barriers for the teachers which highlight the need for continuous professional development as a key element to take into deliberation (DES, 2010). For example, Aistear supports play as the crucial medium through which children learn and develop. While this manner of teaching may be a foreign style employed by a number of teachers, it is nevertheless significant to identify that as a fundamental element, studying ECCE is incorporated in initial teacher training (ITE) in Ireland (INTO, 2006). Moreover, the dissimilarities between both Aistear and the PSC as previously identified in their analysis need to be reflected. Resources, financial support, organisation, planning, assessment, training, curriculum, lack of knowledge, space, time, and class size are all clearly identified in both the literature and the findings as barriers to the implementation of play-based pedagogy in the infant classroom. The difference in the Irish context in Ireland which is not reflected in the literature is the impact of the very high pupil/teacher ratio in infant classes.

On the evidence of the focus group discussions, a reticence was not dispelled by the experience of teachers who have brought play into their classrooms, and who portray progressing barriers in balancing curriculum demands with play-based learning. The teachers' cautious perception is related to their experiences of large classes, small rooms, inadequate resourcing, and lack of classroom assistants. It is hard to see this perception as anything but reasonable given that the only people obliged to bear the brunt of this modification are the teachers in the infant classrooms.

Kagan (1990) termed the constraints that stem from the context of school in which play takes place as functional barriers, such as personnel and in-service training. This lack of sufficient personnel and appropriate in-service professional development result in teachers “forgoing play for easier and more controlled activities” (p.182). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory shows how the micro-system, (the school), is intertwined with the meso-system, (the district), and the exo-system, (provincial department), and how these are interconnected and influence each other. This may possibly consist of factors that can directly and indirectly impact training for teachers and assistance in continuous professional development. Findings in this study verify Bronfenbrenner’s theory and support the literature on issues linked to the support by school management and education district that impact on professional development. As previously mentioned, training sessions were put in place for six weeks, and a professional learning community between the four infant teachers gradually materialised during this time. Learning together as a group allowed teachers to use their combined experiences as a way for contributing ideas to enhance skills and understanding (Parker, Patton, Madden and Sinclair, 2010). At the beginning of the training sessions, infant teachers were a little nervous about discussing their organic lesson plans. By session three, the teachers were engaging and participating much more willingly. Amy thought it was great to have the sessions but felt more pressure when she knew the group would be commenting on it. Ciara was still a little hesitant on extending her thinking on hands-on activities she could incorporate into her lessons. Ella was really trying to be creative through her organic lesson plans, put lots of effort into them, and really enjoyed the feedback She admitted trying out new ideas in her class; some have worked really well while others have been disastrous. Dawn was finding issues with some of her organic lesson plans in so far as expanding the learning and finding resources to use. Due to the training sessions, teachers began to create a bond due to a common interest, improving their approaches and lesson planning for children’s learning through play.

Findings in this study found a professional learning community improves teacher quality, and teacher quality is the most significant element in improving student achievement. This proposes teaching and learning about teaching may possibly be most efficient when carried out collectively in a setting that extends across a teacher’s profession and comprises of social and human capital, or as Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) call it, ‘professional capital’. The less experienced teachers could take advantage of the knowledge and experience of the more experienced teachers and novices could bring current training in pedagogy that could

reinvigorate long-time teachers. These infant teachers developed their professional learning community on a foundation of trust and understanding of difference. They have a place to express concerns and issues which may surface from their own classroom experience. These concerns and issues offer openings for teachers to investigate and think intensely about the inevitable obstacles of a play-based pedagogy.

The teachers reported that participating in a professional learning community gave them a sense of a shared mission and connection to each other. Giving teachers the opportunity to establish their own professional development targets, decide what they require to attain those targets, and granting teachers the space to collaborate to attain achievement will assist form the foundation of teacher development (Patton *et al.*, 2013; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999). They also agreed that they would benefit greatly from effective CDP and they had already experienced changes in teacher learning and change and student learning through the training sessions. Findings from the training sessions align with those of the Guskey and Sparks' (1996) model of the relationship between professional development and improvements in student learning. During the training sessions successful improvement efforts on teacher's dedication was found to develop largely after the training sessions took place. That is to say, teachers became dedicated to the new practices only after they had actively engaged in using them in their classrooms (Crandall, 1983). Again, this supports the notion that change in teachers' understandings occurs primarily after some change in student learning has been confirmed. The timetabling and length of training sessions were consistent; this allowed teachers to implement change, reflect as a group, discuss experiences, and carry this learning back into the infant classroom, with confidence. In addition, findings from the training sessions accord with those from Patton, Parker, and Pratt's (2013) strategy of "learn, try, share" These three categories denote teaching strategies including immediate researcher/teachers' interactions exercised when the researcher and the teachers were together shaping the organic lesson plans, intermediate strategies when the researcher and teachers group were apart when implementing their organic lesson plans, and occasions signifying the prospective for enduring inquiry, when teachers articulated how the lesson went, if any issues or problems arose: with other teachers in the group: (a) learning as doing: giving formation without dictating, (b) learning as trying: forming and examining new ideas, and (c) learning as sharing: public contribution of work.

Issues of classroom practice highlight questions regarding teacher content, knowledge, and approaches to teaching. The infant teachers met regularly each Wednesday for an hour to discuss concerns, problems, positive feedback, queries, and so forth. They found the professional learning community to be a pivotal support to each of them. The bulk of professional development requires teachers to modify a number of features of their practice, eventually requiring them to gain new understanding and to employ that understanding in their classrooms to encourage increased student learning (Vetter, 2012). To assist teachers in this kind of change, effective professional development should be continuous with teachers networking frequently (Keay, May and O'Mahony, 2014). As the majority of teachers work alone in the classroom, isolation ensues and an exchange of ideas is uncommon (O'Sullivan and Deglau, 2006). Thus, long-term professional development presents an opportunity to practice the change with on-site follow-up, with experiences for the group for discussion. Teachers believed professional development is beneficial as it gives opportunities for "hands-on" work that broadens their understanding of educational content and how to impart this knowledge to children (Garet, *et al.*, 2001).

During these training sessions an emergent curriculum was slowly developing. Emergent curriculum is a philosophy of teaching and way of planning curriculum that focuses on being responsive to children's interests to create meaningful learning experiences. This philosophy prioritises active participation, relationship building, flexible and adaptable methods, inquiry, and play-based learning. Such a curriculum is child-initiated, collaborative and responsive to the children's needs. Proponents of this style of teaching advocate that knowledge of the children is the key to success in your program (MachLachlan, Fleeer and Edwards, 2013). The starting point for an emergent curriculum began with the teachers as facilitators who carefully observed and recorded these observations on children at play in the classroom. The documented evidence was used to plan meaningful activities for the children based on their interests. Using this evidence as a planning tool provided for a horizontal learning experience which scaffolds learning for children. As the curriculum is continually changing, emerging, and developing, teachers need to ensure that some time is set aside for reflection on their observations and plan activities to extend on children's interests. Once the teachers observed a child's interest they used this evidence to develop activities that complimented and built upon this emerging interest, with opportunities for play at multiple ability levels.

Observations on these planned activities were modified to accommodate increasing interest or changes in direction of the learning. It was important to organise the learning environment into core curriculum areas or areas of specific interest where activities would have a curricular theme while following children's interests. In these emergent curriculum settings, there were opportunities to involve all the senses, challenge creativity, hear and use oral and written language, explore art media, practice solving interpersonal problems, conduct investigations and ask questions, explore and order material, and acquire various physical skills (MachLachlan *et al.*, 2013). It was still essential for children to understand what was coming next and a good daily routine or daily schedule was vital. As an emergent curriculum focuses on children's independence and scaffolds learning through developing interests, the learning environment was an essential component. Areas of interest contained equipment, toys, and materials which were stored at children's level in order for them to be fully accessible to the children both visually and physically. Areas and equipment were labeled with words and pictures, and materials were kept in clear storage containers for ease of access. In order to accommodate different types of learning the environment provided opportunities for children to work in groups of different sizes, as well as independently. Using open ended materials permitted children to experience and manipulate materials in different ways.

As a result of this study, it was evident that many barriers were identified that hindered teaching and learning through Aistear. Current research findings share common attributes with other research in this field as well as offering a number of further perceptions. The research findings of this research have ringfenced several significant areas which need attention and fundamental recommendations to assist infant teachers' working with Aistear have been developed. These recommendations in conjunction with implications for future research will be discussed in Chapter Six.

5.4 INTEGRATING AISTEAR WITH THE PSC

Findings from this study show teachers in schools are by and large compelled to adhere to the particular curriculum specific to their organisation. In numerous cases, play and curriculum appear antithetical. The former has been usually thought of as an impulsive child-initiated activity that does not provide any realistic need whereas the latter has been linked with intentional teaching intended to achieve comprehensible instructional objectives.

In relation to the findings on understandings about the incompatibility of the PSC with Aistear, there is evidence in the literature that whilst teachers acknowledged curricular expectations as limiting factors, when the curricular documents were examined it became apparent that play was recommended as a methodology (Ranz-Smith, 2007). Given that the PSC (DES, 1999a) and Aistear (2009) highlight the significance of play in junior classes, findings from this study suggest that the isolation of curriculum content into eleven subject areas outweighs the mandate for play in the PSC (DES, 1999a) and Aistear (2009).

The findings here are unequivocal: teachers maintain the PSC to be an important barrier to the integration of play through the Aistear framework. At junior and senior infant level, every part of education was to be arranged through play activities. This significant role of play by Piaget explored

“..., the child forms mathematical concepts as a result of his actions with objects and not from the objects themselves... Passivity has no place in this process... It is essential that the child afforded every opportunity of discovering for himself mathematical relationships in his environment. The use of discovery methods of learning not only leads the child to an understanding of a particular mathematical concept but gives him a general training in organising his intellectual powers as efficiently as possible.”
(Piaget, 1971, p.126)

As a result, the mathematics curriculum for infant classes was planned through free play and experimentation with water, sand, and resources such as shells, blocks, spools, and so on. With reference to reading, the necessary abilities for readiness in reading were manipulated during games and play activities. These incorporated listening and picture games for visual and aural discrimination. Structured materials, for example, bead-threading, sequencing, and jigsaws were used as approaches of developing left-to-right orientation and hand-eye coordination, whereas mime and drama were perceived to develop the child's inventive abilities. It is fundamental that every teacher who works with children in infant classes completely comprehends what play is and its varied forms. Just as significant is the capacity to exercise that knowledge to accomplish what is most suitable for children's development and learning. Teachers need to understand the means wherein child-initiated play when merged with playful, purposeful learning, results in lifelong advantages in a way that didactic teaching, scripted teaching, and standardised assessment do not.

Also comparable to the work of Moyles (1989) teacher's value is the function of play in assisting emotional and social development. Mead (1934) reminds us that the “self,” or one's identity is a result of social communication, since “self” can exist only in a social

context. Research on play and oral language advocates that play offers occasions for children to cultivate their literacy through play by influencing “oral language, metalinguistic awareness and the child’s imagination” (Einarsdóttir, 2014, p.96). “In encouraging them to work and play together, to investigate and observe, the teacher will foster an attitude of trust between herself and her pupils. Kindness and approval of genuine effort will increase the confidence the confidence of the children and foster independent effort.” (Curaclam na Bunscoile, 1971, p.19).

While teachers should choose not to follow policy agendas slavishly, the teachers in this study do not see that as an alternative. Policy frameworks can be a guide, but this is not how the integrating of the PSC and Aistear is perceived. As Kelly (2004, p.214) makes clear, theory, in the absence of practice, may not have much impact in educational settings. “If there is one general lesson to be learned from the experiences of recent years, it is that in education, and probably in all other spheres too, theory and practice must go hand in hand and side by side if either is to benefit in any significant way”. The infant curriculum of eleven subjects are presented and taught as a separate subject, and no explicit information on the integrating of the PSC with Aistear in infant classes has been located to date. This permits exploration of exosystem context through discussion of policies and procedures which shape the primary school setting. The PSC emphasises the significance of integration throughout curricular areas and furthermore maintains “for the young child, the distinctions between subjects are not relevant: what is more important is that he or she experiences a coherent learning process that accommodates a variety of elements (PSC, 1999, p.16). Furthermore, when a teacher attempts to put curriculum into practice, he or she may undergo a further process of development. This procedure may happen in four stages; namely, initial attempts to learn, master, and use the curriculum, eventually resulting in self-assurance and expertise to regulate and change it, in order for the curriculum to be suitable and fitting the function of a specific setting. Irrespective of which theories, or mixture of theories, at the end of the day supporting a redeveloped PSC, it is important that classroom-focused examples of these theories are provided to assist teachers in their delivery.

The employment of play-based pedagogy as a method of discovery in infant classes can be demanding for the teacher (Thomas *et al.*, 2011). In Ireland, the NCCA (2009) review on Aistear and the PSC proposed a combined action between both documents and supports to

be offered to teachers implementing Aistear in their infant classes. However, Gray and Ryan (2016) discovered that the needs of Aistear and the PSC were equally distinct and exclusive:

“Children learn best when all areas of an integrated, carefully planned curriculum are implemented informally using methodologies that are interactive, practical and enjoyable. Children should have opportunities to experience much of their learning through well planned and challenging play.”
(CCEA, 2003, p.7)

For positive integration of the PSC and Aistear teachers ought to offer open-ended, child-led and child-initiated play occasions in parallel to teacher-led, teacher-initiated opportunities focused on particular results. The findings from this study suggest that such integrating approaches sporadically relate to present understandings on the PSC and Aistear in infant classes. The findings also suggest that teachers are anxious to cover each subject on the structured timetable, but unsure how to integrate Aistear into the different subjects is the issue. The literacy and numeracy strategy (DES, 2011a, p.48) refers to play “as a methodology for facilitating learning”, from the findings no proof that teachers’ interpretation of play-based pedagogy is impacted by the strategy. In contrast, the literacy and numeracy strategy (DES, 2011a) is recommended for direct teaching methods. Aistear can play an important role in the NCCA’s ongoing review of the PSC (1999) and in supporting continuity and progression in children’s learning. While teachers support ‘Aistear time’, they nevertheless deem it essential to have formal learning in infant classes owing to further issues, for instance, demands on completing the curriculum by the end of the school year. Throughout this research study there appeared a tension and implication for play-based pedagogy of observations that all teachers maintained that some type of formal teaching was required when teaching infants. During the training sessions a shift was observed over time towards the more fluid type of teaching that was later seen to work well. The terms ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ which were referred to in some quotes, the more fluid (informal) pedagogy in early childhood may be more valuable in supporting learning for this ‘ecological niche’ of childhood than the more traditional (formal) primary school method.

The current findings are in agreement with the NCCA and the INTO who found curriculum overload was a concern and caused issues for teachers. These findings are consistent with Moyles and Worthington (2011) in the UK reception classes, where they noted the equilibrium between covering the curriculum and meeting the learning requirements of children can be demanding for teachers. This is also consistent with Hayes (2003) who noted, that primary school teachers maintained that ‘real work’ is dealt with and

may underrate the consequence of play. In support of this Mead (1934) claimed children who are encouraged in their play are impacted in a positive manner regarding learning. All teachers found that implementing play had benefits. The DES in the United Kingdom described play as “an essential and rich part of the learning process” (DES, 1990, p.7). For all the optimistic sentiments regarding the capacity of ‘Aistear time’ to support curriculum integration, it was clear that the all teachers considered Aistear and the PSC as two disconnected frameworks they had to contend with.

The development of a playful attitude to learning and teaching in the infant classroom is critical to implementing Aistear successfully with the PSC. All teachers carried out their Aistear training at a nearby education centre and all teachers reported being to employ Aistear for one hour each day by means of the plan-play-review process. The Aistear session commenced when specific areas were set up in the infant classroom also known as “play stations”. All teachers found that implementing play had benefits.

Diverse approaches employing Aistear seems to be deficient in direction and consistency in infant classrooms. The manner in which Aistear time is implemented in infant classrooms has repercussions for children such as negatively impacting the emotional and social development of children in addition to their cognitive development. Correctly implementing Aistear can enhance children’s learning readiness, learning behaviours and problem- solving skills. Post-training sessions were of one hour duration. Whilst the research findings discussed in 4.1 teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy suggests that these teachers consider play important for children’s learning, there is a thin line between guiding and modelling and being intrusively involved. If the teacher guides all the children in a similar direction, the children will presume there is only one correct answer and will almost certainly attempt to discover the answer the teacher wants. In addition, children will not take ownership of the problem if the teacher does the work for them. Therefore, it is imperative that the teacher lets children question things in a different way. Both Mead and Bronfenbrenner considered interactions with others and taking diverse types of roles the basis for children’s development. References to interactions echo the ‘proximal processes’, or engines of development as the foundation from which to develop our knowledge of why interactions are significant to development. Interactions with their environment and the people and objects within form the apparatus through which children learn.

It is furthermore through interactions that adults can update their planning and teaching and so the collaboration procedure has the potential to become twice as transformative.

Bronfenbrenner saw the learning environment as a socialisation environment in which children are in continuous interaction. Mead argued that a child should be seen as being born into a particular social and physical environment with specific biological characteristics. He or she then acquires from those environments a multifaceted collection of covert and overt behaviour that impacts and shapes both micro and macro-society and the broader environmental system (Baldwin 1986). The bio-ecological model emphasises the vital role of the interaction between the biological and the social in child development and learning. “Because the period of secular instruction for children in infant classes may be shorter than that provided for older children, the suggested time framework is not directly applicable, as it is for other class groups. The child at infant level perceives and experiences learning in an integrated way. This requires particular approaches to teaching and learning and will entail a more flexible use of the suggested time frame” (PSC, 1999, p.69). In recent times, Gray and Ryan’s (2016) research on how Aistear is presently integrated with the PSC established teachers found teachers do not have the comprehension and/or necessary training to change their practice and instil the aims of Aistear in tandem with the infant PSC.

CHAPTER SIX

RECOMMENDATIONS

“The opposite of play is not work. It’s depression.”

Brian Sutton-Smith

6.0 INTRODUCTION

This research study was *an exploration of infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy within the Irish context*. The study established several important findings as discussed in Chapter Five. These findings are here summarised in respect of the main research question above. This chapter will subsequently form recommendations as a result of these findings. Lastly, several issues playing a role for future research will be discussed.

6.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Very little is known about the issues infant teachers have to deal with in implementing Aistear into their daily teaching in the context of the PSC. This research, although the sample size is small, does highlight the various barriers facing teachers, and undoubtedly identifies a number of avenues for further research and action. In addition this research identifies what effective CPD is able to accomplish: this is important for both CPD providers and policy decision makers. The findings from this study show that a large amount of what teacher understandings regarding play-based pedagogy is not about play but is about change. It is apparent they believe introducing play into the infant classroom would not be a risk, but would mean a divergence from the normal practice. Teachers believe that because there is no obligation to employ Aistear within the primary school system there is no dedication to implementing it with the PSC in infant classrooms. They deem Aistear valuable for children’s social, emotional, literacy, numeracy and oral development. Aistear in the infant classroom seems to be understood as instrumental, instead of a holistic approach to all elements of children’s learning and development. Key findings materialised from the data collected:

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- Teacher Understandings of Play-Based Pedagogy
- Teacher Role During Play
- Barriers when Implementing Play
- Integrating Aistear with the PSC

As was apparent throughout the analysis of the individual semi-structured interviews, Classroom Observations Phases 1 2 and focus group sessions that the infant teachers believe Aistear to be an important and valuable teaching and learning methodology for infant education. However, this research study revealed an significant discrepancy in the data where learning through Aistear was appreciated by the teachers as teachers continue to insist that a formal method is needed when implementing Aistear. The use of Aistear was discussed in a positive way by all teachers, highlighting children's enjoyment in it. The implementation of Aistear, in which play is the crucial teaching and learning methodology, was a major focus of the teachers' discussions in both the semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions. Each teacher implemented Aistear to varying degrees depending on their quantity of support and previous education and training. This differing use of Aistear in infant classes is crucial to this research study, identifying how the policy and situation of ECEC in Ireland has transformed in recent years and is progressing to transform.

Even though both the literature and teachers were positive about the use of Aistear in infant classes, barriers materialised during the research study. Infant teachers believed the PSC (DES, 1999b) was "overloaded" and they felt "under pressure" to finish it. The teachers also felt that there was a lack of guidelines for the correct implementation of Aistear in their classroom. All teachers had implemented Aistear in some form in their classroom, and five play stations were set in accordance with the planned theme for a set timeframe, for instance, two weeks or four weeks. This planned theme sometimes integrated teachers' individual planning for curriculum objectives. At times this integration proved too difficult and time consuming for teachers to accomplish. Teachers were using 'Aistear time' by way of a plan-play-review model, with the play part normally for a period of around thirty to forty-five minutes instead of the recommended one hour of 'Aistear time'. Differences in the regularity of Aistear implemented in the infant classroom were noted, and ranged from three times a week for forty-five minutes to every day for forty to forty-five minutes. These findings suggest that Aistear is not being implemented as recommended by local education centres in infant classrooms.

Findings in this research study found that during ‘Aistear time’, teachers’ roles were multifaceted. Both teachers and the literature considered play to be intrinsically motivating for children and allows children autonomy to learn for themselves. The holistic development of children was identified by the teachers and in the literature as being developed through active engagement in Aistear. The teachers also cited the advantages for developing literacy, numeracy and social skills through Aistear.

The teachers also believed that the lack of resources stalled the use of Aistear and that more funding and resources were essential to improve the use of Aistear in infant classrooms. The researcher has highlighted in the literature, how other countries such as Sweden have designed their curriculum to promote developmentally appropriate methodologies, such as play, in order to maximise the child’s learning. Teacher understandings and support was another issue highlighted during this research study. Some of the teachers held negative attitudes and a lack of support from their colleagues when implementing Aistear in their classroom. These teachers believed that this was due to a lack of knowledge of the advantages of using Aistear. Teachers also discussed how they felt incompetent and lacked confidence using Aistear in the classroom and were not fully aware of the right way to implement Aistear it. Teachers felt that they did not have sufficient time to fully implement play and that class size also impacted on this. Recommendations emerged following discussion with the teachers and by analysing relevant literature. These recommendations should improve the teaching and learning environment for infant teachers and with that ensure that all infant classes are receiving a developmentally appropriate teaching and learning methodology.

6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Through reflection of the data collected and analysis of the relevant literature, the following recommendations materialised for the improvement of teaching and learning of Aistear. Certainly the findings from this research study have shown a constructive attitude towards ‘Aistear time’ in infant classrooms. Nevertheless, infant teachers’ experiences with Aistear in infant school classrooms are even now far from perfect at present. A number of barriers including time, class size, CPD, and lack of knowledge by teachers are impeding the implementation of ‘Aistear time’ in junior and senior infant classrooms. As well as the findings presented in Chapter Four, the subsequent recommendations should be addressed in

an attempt to facilitate the implementation of Aistear time in infant classrooms in primary schools.

The DES could offer regular extra material and equipment to support primary schools regarding the implementation of Aistear. Teachers in this study highlighted many barriers in endeavouring to implement Aistear in their classroom, frequently feeling they were in isolation trying to implement Aistear time in their school. All teachers noted how lack of time, class size, space, CPD, and lack of knowledge were serious obstacles for the implementation of ‘Aistear time’.

The DES could consider offering more widespread CPD training to all primary school teachers. Training at present is offered outside of work hours by local education centres under the Aistear Tutor Initiative. All teachers desired practical, hands-on, on-site CPD training. CPD could be completed as a whole-school during Croke Park hours, guaranteeing all staff members are knowledgeable. This would guarantee that all infant classes are receiving an identical educational experience. Further education and training would additionally enhance teachers’ self-assurance and competence in implementing play. Peer-training and mentoring within schools could also be helpful to teachers who have not finished training prior to teaching infants. Learning and sharing experiences together with colleagues could also assist to apply new information to authentic situations, conquer mutual barriers, and build stronger relationships between pre-school and infant classes by jointly attending pre-service training and education courses. Developing a community of learners across teacher communities enhance teacher quality and teacher quality is the crucial factor in developing student achievement. This could make Aistear more approachable to integration and incorporation into classroom activities.

The Primary Language Curriculum incorporates principles and methodologies of Aistear and builds on children’s prior language learning and development in early childhood settings. All teachers in Irish primary schools should be made aware of the advantages and significance of using play as a teaching and learning methodology, so as to enhance attitude and support in every school.

6.3 FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has opened a significant window into *an exploration of infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy within the Irish context*. Nonetheless, this current study signals ample opportunities for future research to facilitate the improvement of our comprehension in this field. These include:

1. The position of male teachers in infant classrooms and their views regarding Aistear
2. Additional research could establish the frequency of understandings regarding play-based pedagogy identified in this study
3. Principals' viewpoints on play-based pedagogy in infant classrooms and research to explore their perspectives on this topic would offer a considerable wealth of information as educational leaders
4. Collating the opinions from parents regarding their thoughts on the use of 'Aistear time' and learning through play in infant classrooms in Ireland
5. Video recorded classroom observations to allow revisits of material to get a deeper understanding of observations
6. Provided with extra time, a longitudinal study of a larger sample could take place. This would allow for the opinions and experiences of infant teachers from a vaster area of the country.
7. The age profile of teachers at infant level and how this could influence the use of Aistear in the classroom.
8. Interviewing and observing children would enable the researcher to elicit a fuller understanding of the child in terms of how they like to play and learn, how children's skills are developed by Aistear, and the level of engagement in their learning.

6.4 CONCLUSION

It is obvious that Aistear presents numerous occasions to address learning outcomes and learning objectives across the curriculum. Nonetheless, play-based pedagogy remains considerably underdeveloped in Irish classrooms (Gray and Ryan, 2016; McConnell, 2016; Hollingsworth, 2016). To guarantee that Aistear, an arguably essential requirement for a successful play-based pedagogy, attains its potential in infant classrooms, the issue of

continuous professional development and support must be attended to. The establishment of a play-based curriculum framework in Ireland will require considerable investment in on-going continuous professional development that is complex in nature. Real change predicated on continuous professional development must be lived by teachers (Pramling, Sammuelssohn and Carlsson, 2008) with long-term and on-going support is necessary during the process. To date, studies (Pramling Sammuelssohn and Carlsson, 2008; Moyles, 2010) have successfully demonstrated that teachers need explicit training to comprehend how play and learning are connected, because teacher training and established practice arguably conditions them to revert to the more traditional “teachy” methods of learning (Gray and Ryan, 2016, p.191).

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

LETTERS OF INTRODUCTION AND CONSENT



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

University of Limerick

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences

“Xela House”,
Ballyhurst,
Tipperary,
February 11th 2014

Letter of introduction

Dear Principal,

I understand that you lead a very busy schedule and thank you for taking the time out of your day to read this letter.

The above mentioned person is a PhD student in the PESS Department, at the faculty of Education and Health Sciences, at the University of Limerick. It is with great enthusiasm that I request the participation of infant teachers and students at your school in a study entitled:
An exploration of infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy within the Irish context.

The main focus of this research study is to explore teachers' beliefs and attitudes on whether it is possible to implement play as a methodology of learning in infant classes in Ireland. In order to gather the necessary information, the researcher would like an infant teacher from your school to take part in a semi-structured interview with Linda Davern. The researcher would also like to carry out classroom observations with the focus on learning through play. Finally, the researcher would like teachers to participate in a pre and post focus group. The focus group will have a time commitment of approximately one hour and the classroom observations will also last for one hour.

As stated above, this is an academic research study and hence all the information to be obtained will be used solely for this exercise. All ethical considerations whilst performing this research will be observed and confidentiality will be guaranteed.

Again, I thank you for taking the time to consider my proposal. If you are willing to participate in this study or if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor at your earliest convenience.

Kind regards,

Linda Davern

Linda Davern PhD Candidate
University of Limerick
Email: lindadavern@eircom.net
Tel: 0862313463

Dr Daniel Tindall
PESS Dept. – University of Limerick
Email: Daniel.Tindall@ul.ie
Tel: 061234828



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

University of Limerick

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences

Letter of introduction

Dear Teacher,

Hello! My name is Linda Davern, a PhD student in the PESS Department, at the faculty of Education and Health Sciences, at the University of Limerick. It is with great enthusiasm that I would like to request your participation in a research study entitled: *An exploration of infant teacher understandings of play-based pedagogy within the Irish context*.

The main focus of this research study is to explore teachers' beliefs and attitudes on whether it is possible to implement play as a methodology of learning in infant classes in Ireland. In order to gather the necessary information, I would like for you to participate in a semi-structured interview. Additionally, I would also like to carry a classroom observation with the focus on learning through play. Finally, I would like you to participate in a pre and post focus group. The focus group will have a time commitment of approximately one hour and the classroom observation will also last for one hour. This is an academic research study and hence all the information to be obtained will be used solely for this exercise. All ethical considerations whilst performing this research will be observed and confidentiality will be guaranteed.

I thank you for taking the time to consider my proposal. I understand that you lead a very busy schedule and appreciate you taking time out of your day to read this letter. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor at your earliest convenience.

Kind regards,

Linda Davern
University of Limerick
Email: lindadavern@eircom.net
Tel: 0862313463

Dr Daniel Tindall (*principle investigator*)
PESS Dept. – University of Limerick
Email: Daniel.Tindall@ul.ie
Tel: 061234828

This study has been approved by the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (**APPROVAL #2013_00_00_EHS**). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact The EHS Research Ethics Contact Point of the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Room E1003, University of Limerick, Limerick. Tel (061) 234101 / Email: ehsresearchethics@ul.ie



UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

University *of* Limerick
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences

Consent Form

I agree/do not agree to participate in this research.

Signed: _____

APPENDIX 2

QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW WITH INFANT TEACHERS

How many years have you been teaching in the infant classroom?

How many children are in your infant classroom?

What is the arrangement of your infant classroom?

Which curriculum are you presently using as an infant teacher?

How would you define play-based learning within the infant classroom?

Ok, during your training what theories of play and learning did you cover?

To what extent has the development of Aistear influenced curriculum delivery in your classroom?

What is your opinion of play in the infant classroom?

What is the role of the adult in Aistear?

In your opinion do you believe children really learn using a formal approach?

What types of play do you believe are most beneficial for children's learning?

What are the benefits for using a play-based approach from the teacher's perspective?

Do you think that there are issues and/or opportunities with integrating Aistear into the curriculum?

How could you enhance the provision of play in the infant classroom?

How do you assess and record progress made during play?

Any other comments?

APPENDIX 3

INTERVIEW 1 WITH AMY

I Thank you for participating in this interview.

AMY No problem at all.

I How many years have you been teaching in the infant classroom?

AMY I have taught for 6 years in the infant classroom setting.

I How many children are in your infant classroom?

AMY 30 children.

I What is the arrangement of your infant classroom?

AMY I have all junior infants.

I Which curriculum are you presently using as an infant teacher?

AMY Ahm, I'm using the revised primary school curriculum (1999) for the majority of my teaching. I'm also using elements of Aistear, it's a play framework used in infant classes.

I How would you define play-based learning within the infant classroom?

AMY Ahm, I suppose it's really about the child learning through exploration and developing their social skills as they participate in group work. It's really a method that is used to teach children using play.

I Ok, during your training what theories of play and learning did you cover?

AMY Ahm, we did cover areas of play and learning but only a very small part was spent on it, nothing major really.

I To what extent has the development of Aistear influenced curriculum delivery in your classroom?

AMY Ahm, yeah, Aistear I think is going to impact hugely in the future as teachers become familiar and confident using it. At the moment I'm trying to link Aistear to the primary school curriculum through my lesson plans. Ahm, I find it time consuming, it demands lots of work on my part preparing lesson plans, ahm, how to make the link and also sourcing resources all takes time. Having said that, the children all love 'Aistear time', ahm, it's fun, ahm, during play the children don't realise how much they are learning themselves. I enjoy 'Aistear time' with the children, ahm, the children are in charge of their own learning through play and I have seen changes in some of the children who could normally be disruptive during a structured lesson, ahm, much more involved in their play episode and also interacting in a more positive manner with their peers.

I What is your opinion of play in the infant classroom?

AMY Yeah, I do think it's a positive element, especially for children because they are given an opportunity to voice their views, develop socially by turn-taking and collaborating with peers and ahm, children are allowed time to express their opinions. Their social skills are developed as they work together in groups and help each other in their learning. I have seen children resolve conflicts on their own without my intervention, which is again social learning. To observe children being totally engrossed in an activity, this is where real concentration and learning takes place. Ahm, I suppose when you think about it, children learn in different ways, ahm, all children like to play, so, yeah, learning through play caters for all children.

I What is the role of the teacher in Aistear?

AMY Well, as I said I try and use Aistear in my classroom for an hour a day. Ahm, because there are so many other things going on in the classroom, it's not possible to find a full hour for Aistear, it could be thirty minutes. I use five different stations, ahm, for example, I have a reading station, a dress up area, art and craft area etc. I tell the children what stations to go to and then I would walk to each station to see what the children were doing. I tend to, ahm, let the children work independently as much as they can, but at times I would join in the play and ask what they were doing or if I felt they were struggling or having difficulty I would intervene. It's really knowing when to intervene!

I In your opinion do you believe children really learn using a formal approach?

AMY You know, sometimes I find it easier to teach the children when they are sitting in their seats listening to me. Ahm, it's more structured and organised, but in saying that, since I have started using Aistear I have seen benefits to the children's learning overall. I think it is going to change the way teachers and also the way children think. Play is important in children's learning, ahm, I have to allocate more time in my lesson planning in order to link play with children's learning. Through Aistear, children are encouraged to become confident and competent learners. Their social skills are developed as they work together in groups and help each other in their learning. So, ahm, I suppose I'm saying, there's room for a mixture of both teaching methods, it's just understanding how to integrate both into the classroom at the same time.

I What types of play do you believe are most beneficial for children's learning?

AMY Ahm, all types of play are important for all children, from ahm, physical play, to pretend play and so on. Pretend play involves at the doctors, dentists, dress up area, play accessories like, ahm, buggies, dolls, the usual play things. I've said already, all children have different learning abilities, an example is news time, some children find it difficult to speak independently about their news, through role-play and drama they can act out their news in small groups. Ahm, in my classroom the children do creative play through arts and crafts, drama, ahm, physical play is incorporated through p.e., drama, outdoor activities, ahm, what else, oh the sand and water table. To be honest, ahm, I don't do enough outdoor play with our weather it's not always suitable to go outside, and if we do go out, it's more lesson planning on my behalf for activities for outdoor learning through play. The children go out at break time, I suppose it would be more free play that they would use.

I What are the benefits of using a play-based approach from the teacher's perspective?

AMY Oh God, ahm, well, firstly I think you have to be prepared, you have to spend time planning on what you are going to teach the children and what resources are required. Over time, ahm, you get an idea of what a child is interested in and also what they aren't interested in, ahm, this helps when I'm planning because, ahm, when children are interested in something, they will be more focused and then learning takes place. I've noticed that during play, the children's oral language has developed significantly, when the children play together, they discuss things, problem-solve, give and take instructions. From a teacher's perspective, I am getting to know more about the children I suppose more than normally as I would never have really engaged in a play-based approach in my classroom before. Ahm, I look at things now from a child's perspective rather than constantly giving instructions and moving on to the next topic. I'm still learning though, I'm not going to pretend everything runs smoothly, some activities have been disastrous, ahm, an example was the sand and water table, too many children were around it, between pushing and shoving, the table fell over, water all over the place, needless to say the table didn't come out of the storage room for a while.

I Do you think that there are issues and/or opportunities with integrating Aistear into the curriculum?

AMY Well, from implementing a play-based approach through Aistear, ahm, I now understand that by **not** using a play-based approach I am restricting the children's imagination, communicative skills, socialisation skills. Ahm, I suppose when the children are at different stations, I find it a challenge to observe them while they are playing, ahm, a lot of

activity can be going on, noise levels are high, yeah, I find that a challenge. Ahm, another challenge I think I mentioned earlier, an hour of Aistear is a lot of time solely to play, I already have an overloaded timetable, it's knowing how to bring play into other curriculum areas, ahm, integrate play, that's the word, feeling comfortable to integrate play into other curriculum areas. I suppose, I'm used to the primary school curriculum, Aistear feels a little alien at the moment.

I How could you enhance the provision of play in the infant classroom?

AMY Well, the issue I have is lack of space and resources. Limited space setting up five different stations and limited resources to put into these stations. My wish is having a really resourced classroom. That is very important for me, I have resources but I would love to have lots more and proper space to store them. I try to have resources within children's reach, but this is not possible as I just don't have the space. I really feel that more resources would benefit children's play as children get bored quickly when using the same resources continuously. If another adult was present in the classroom to help out between the different stations, extra support in the classroom would be of huge benefit to me. I find it difficult to observe thirty children at the one time, it's not possible really.

Ahm, it would be great if I was confident enough not to isolate 'Aistear time' but integrate the two simultaneously, I feel I wouldn't be using two different curriculums. Ahm, I suppose I have to interact more with the children, by entering into a role-play situation for example, sometimes it's difficult to do this if the other four stations are unattended, it's something I'm not very comfortable with, that's something I've to work on.

I How do you assess and record progress made during play?

AMY Ok, assessing children's progress during play, ahm, this is time consuming, if I had to write a written report each day for 30 children while also assessing their learning through the primary school curriculum, I would get nothing taught only writing up assessment records. I use samples of children's work and photographs of their work when assessing their progress during play. It's a hard one really, again it all goes back to more paperwork doesn't it!

I Any other comments?

AMY Ahm, just on being more confident using a play-based approach, I have attended a CPD course on Aistear, it's all interesting when you're listening to someone, but, ahm, to come back to your classroom and to try and put what you've learnt into practice can sometimes be daunting. So maybe in house training might be more beneficial to infant teachers'. Aistear for dummies! Ha!.

I Thank you so much for your time in participating in this interview!

AMY Happy to do so!

I = Interviewer

AMY = Respondent 1

Interview held on Tuesday 25th March, 2014.

Transcribed on Wednesday 26th March, 2014.

APPENDIX 4

INTERVIEW 2 WITH ELLA

I Thank you for participating in this interview.

ELLA Delighted to be involved in this research.

I How many years have you been teaching in the infant classroom?

ELLA I have taught for two years in the infant classroom.

I How many children are in your infant classroom?

ELLA 20 children.

I What is the arrangement of your infant classroom?

ELLA I have senior infants, boys and girls.

I Which curriculum are you presently using as an infant teacher?

ELLA I use the primary school curriculum (1999) for the majority of my teaching ahm, I also use Aistear, a curriculum framework, it was introduced to our school two years ago. I do Aistear four days a week for half an hour. Ahm, I think the concept of Aistear is good but perhaps the people who explained Aistear to us on a CPD could do so in a clearer way, there are lots of aims and learning goals and it was confusing when trying to integrate them into my lesson plans. There is an awful lot going on with Aistear and I find it difficult and time consuming linking both the primary school curriculum and Aistear together, maybe I need to be more knowledgeable of Aistear!

I How would you define play-based learning within the infant classroom?

ELLA Learning through hands on experiences. Ahm, understanding the world and developing social skills through play.

I Ok, during your training what theories of play and learning did you cover?

ELLA Oh God, it's a while now since I trained in college, I can't remember. Ahm, as I said earlier, I did a CPD course on Aistear in the infant classroom. It didn't really cover theories of play and learning, it was more ideas on how to use play in the classroom, interesting, but a different method of teaching from the primary school curriculum.

I To what extent has the development of Aistear influenced curriculum delivery in your classroom?

ELLA Aistear has had an impact on the way I teach now. Our training as teacher's was subject based taught in a structured manner. Aistear is telling us to link both together, ahm it's difficult to incorporate both from a teacher's point of view, a huge amount of planning takes place, it's time consuming, but on the other hand, when the children are engaged in play it seems natural to them and are actively learning, ahm, so yeah, I can see the benefits of Aistear, it's just the combining of the two curriculums into one, that's where I have issues.

I What is your opinion of play in the infant classroom?

ELLA Yeah, I think it is a positive thing. Play is natural to children, it's what they know best. I believe children learn and understand better through play. Through play, children are experiencing real experiences in everyday life and ahm, can relate to them. Play allows children to become competent, confident learners. I have noticed that they have developed confidence to ask questions and ahm, not just take my answer as being the correct answer. This said, I find during Aistear I have to use different vocabulary, ahm, open ended questions, that's it. Usually, during my teaching of the primary school curriculum, I'm instructing the children on what to do, but when doing Aistear I find it's a different type of teaching, ahm, more informal, don't know if that makes sense!

I What is the role of the teacher in Aistear?

ELLA. Ahm, well through Aistear we have our different workstations. Five children are at each station. I would pick a theme for each week and try and incorporate a lesson plan on that theme. Ahm, it takes quite an amount of planning and wondering is this actually going to work, what do I want them to learn, I find you have to be creative in your thinking, sometimes I don't have the time for it, I have other subjects to teach also. I allow the children freedom while they are engaging in an activity, I try to observe them mostly and if I'm needed they can approach me for assistance. Isn't Aistear about developing competent and confident learners!

I In your opinion do you believe children really learn using a formal approach?

ELLA Ahm, I don't know. Children learn both using a formal and non-formal approach. Which is the best approach, I don't know, I suppose a bit of both. I mean, you need structure in your class, ahm, children sitting down listening to the instructions and working in a controlled environment. On the other hand since Aistear appeared, ahm, I see children are more involved and interested in their activities, language and social skills are at a higher level. There is quite an amount of movement in the classroom when Aistear is going on, ahm, the noise level is another factor to take on board.

I What types of play do you believe are most beneficial for children's learning?

ELLA Yeah, there's a lot of different types of play. I guess all types are important, in relation to my classroom I see socio-dramatic play is very beneficial to the children. They all love to dress up and take on different characters, guard, vet, etc. The attention to detail, for example, one day two children were playing 'vets'. The 'vet' asked what was wrong with her dog, the girls replied "she has a lump in her tummy, do you think she is having a baby"? The 'vet'

examined the dog very carefully and finally gave a diagnosis of a cyst that had to be removed immediately. So, yeah, socio-dramatic play would be the most significant in my classroom.

I What are the benefits for using a play-based approach from the teacher's perspective?

ELLA Benefits, well, definitely the children are happy and excited when we are doing Aistear. I look at children as children, sometimes we forget that they are only four and five years of age. I feel their oral language is improving, their range of vocabulary during pretend play or socio-dramatic play is quite impressive, for example 'highly contagious', 'exhausted', 'amazed' and 'serious consequences'. Would I have been able to explain these words using flashcards? From my perspective, I just wish I found it easier to integrate the two curriculums together rather than keeping them separate from each other.

I Do you think that there are issues and/or opportunities with integrating Aistear into the curriculum?

ELLA Resources, resources, resources. Need I say anymore? I find when setting up the different stations, ahm, you do need lots more equipment and resources. Getting back to your question, if I didn't engage with a play-based approach, ahm, I'm not allowing the children their right to play. Definitely learning does take place through play, ahm, an hour is a substantial amount of time devoted to play, ahm, where to draw a happy medium, that's the grey area.

I How could you enhance the provision of play in the infant classroom?

ELLA Truthfully, I could be more open to play in the classroom. I'm very familiar to the primary school curriculum, ahm the Aistear appeared and we were supposed to just implement it. It's completely different to the primary school curriculum – teaching of subjects, it's not a play curriculum. Ahm, for me to do drama in the classroom is daunting let alone an hour of play. If we could have someone trained in Aistear come to the school and work with my limited resources and classroom space, maybe it might become clearer to me and ahm, maybe I might be more comfortable in my own ability to do exciting and fun activities through play.

I How do you assess and record progress made during play?

ELLA Observations. Sometimes I may observe a target child if I was looking for something in particular, ahm, for example language development. I would observe the child perhaps during a role-play scenario. Photos, video recording and children's work would be used to record their progress.

I Any other comments?

ELLA Ahm, I think play is very valuable in the classroom, I've seen benefits of it, ahm, maybe some guidance and training on how to engage with the children. A compacted version of Aistear for teachers.

I Thank you so much for your time in participating in this interview!

ELLA Cheers, no problem!

I = Interviewer

ELLA = Respondent 2

Interview held on Friday 28th March, 2014.

Transcribed on Saturday 29th March, 2014.

APPENDIX 5

INTERVIEW 3 WITH DAWN

I Thank you for participating in this interview.

DAWN Thank You.

I How many years have you been teaching in the infant classroom?

DAWN I have taught for 9 years in the infant classroom.

I How many children are in your infant classroom?

DAWN 34 children.

I What is the arrangement of your infant classroom?

DAWN I have 34 all junior infant girls.

I Which curriculum are you presently using as an infant teacher?

DAWN I'm using the Irish primary school curriculum (1999), I'm also using Aistear, it's a curriculum framework that encourages learning through play.

I How would you define play-based learning within the infant classroom?

DAWN It's a form of teaching that is child-centred. Ahm, it's where an emphasis is put on play for children's learning.

I Ok, during your training what theories of play and learning did you cover?

DAWN We did a module on child education. When we graduated we were told by a college lecturer that we should do a course on Aistear.

I To what extent has the development of Aistear influenced curriculum delivery in your classroom?

DAWN Ok Aistear has an impact on the way we as teachers teach and has an impact on the way children learn. The primary school curriculum in my opinion is still a very structured, ahm, formal approach to teaching. Aistear advocates learning through play while integrating with the primary school curriculum. My issue is, how can we do Aistear for one hour each day and then go back to formal teaching, ahm, it's hard to fuse the two curriculums together as one.

I What is your opinion of play in the infant classroom?

DAWN Absolutely, play-based learning is a positive element in the classroom. It allows children the independence to direct their own play, ahm, play develops their communication skills, problem-solving skills and collaboration skills. It's the planning and the organisation are the issues not the benefits of play.

I What is the role of the teacher in Aistear?

DAWN Well, having thirty four junior infants is chaotic at the best of times, ahm, implementing play has its problems, like, sorry, ahm, finding the space for the different stations. The organisation takes up so much of my time. Engaging in their play is basically

spending a few minutes at each station, ahm, sometimes I feel I could develop their play if I had extra help in the class, for example a childcare worker, they could attend to two stations, ahm, engaging with the children while I engage with the other two stations. Due to the large ratio of children in my classroom, I listen and observe to what they are doing at times taking brief notes.

I In your opinion do you believe children really learn using a formal approach to learning?

DAWN Yes and no. Yes they do learn using a formal approach, I suppose it's didactic learning, but do they retain the knowledge and does it make sense to the children. Since reading up on play, learning and Aistear, I feel children enjoy themselves much more when learning through play, ahm, they are having fun, smiling and laughing, so yes they are learning using an informal approach. To answer your question using both approaches allow children to learn, but by using an informal approach – play, they understand the concepts quicker and easier because it's hands on, using their own thinking to solve problems and relating events to everyday situations – real experiences.

I What types of play do you believe are most beneficial for children's learning?

DAWN All playing is learning. I wouldn't have a preference for one over the other, ahm, I believe all play is beneficial to children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development.

I What are the benefits for using a play-based approach from the teacher's perspective?

DAWN Benefits, children are happy. Their concentration skills I feel have improved as have their oral communication skills. They are proud of the 'work' they have done and take ownership of it. I find I'm appreciating what the children can do on their own without my input, ahm, it's a happy time, if chaotic.

I Do you think that there are issues and/or opportunities with integrating Aistear into the curriculum?

DAWN I find it a challenge to observe the large numbers while they are placed at different stations, ahm, noise levels are elevated, I find that can be annoying. Ahm, another challenge is having the confidence to bring play into other curriculum areas, feeling comfortable integrating play into the primary school curriculum.

I How could you enhance the provision of play in the infant classroom?

DAWN Space, storage space, resources, extra person in classroom. Teachers can't do it all, even though it is expected of us, ahm, I really feel a childcare worker could help in many ways, preparing the room, tidying after class, etc.

I How do you assess and record progress made during play?

DAWN Assessing their learning, again very hard to do with large numbers, observing their overall development, has language developed, development of social skills, watch for body language, brief notes/comments.

I Any other comments?

DAWN To be more comfortable using a play-based approach in my classroom. On-site training/support group and a more user friendly Aistear guideline, way too much to take in.

I Thank you so much for your time in participating in this interview!

DAWN Your very welcome, best of luck!

I = Interviewer

DAWN = Respondent 3

Interview held on Tuesday 1st April, 2014.

Transcribed on Wednesday 2nd April, 2014.

APPENDIX 6

INTERVIEW 4 WITH CIARA

I Thank you for participating in this interview.

CIARA Delighted to.

I How many years have you been teaching in the infant classroom?

CIARA I have taught for 20 years in the infant classroom.

I How many children are in your infant classroom?

CIARA 22 children.

I What is the arrangement of your infant classroom?

CIARA I have junior and senior infants. Ahm, 8 juniors and 14 seniors.

I Which curriculum are you presently using as an infant teacher?

CIARA Two really, the primary school curriculum (1999) and Aistear (2009). I use both but separately. Aistear is used three days a week for roughly forty five minutes, the remainder of the time is spent teaching through the primary school curriculum.

I How would you define play-based learning within the infant classroom?

CIARA Play-based learning is where a child is learning through play in an independent way with little contact from an adult.

I Ok, during your training what theories of play and learning did you cover?

CIARA We did, not a huge amount as far as I can remember, I know there's Montessori and Froebel.

I To what extent has the development of Aistear influenced curriculum delivery in your classroom?

CIARA Aistear is going to impact on infant classes once it becomes more simple and straightforward. Aistear is beneficial in my classroom. All the children look forward to Aistear, there is a huge amount of learning taking place without them knowing it. Relationships have got stronger, development of social skills, general positive well-being in the classroom. Síolta, I think I've heard of it, not really sure though.

I What is your opinion of play in the infant classroom?

CIARA Yes, I do think it's a positive element, for me and the children. There is fun, laughter, smiley faces, noise, movement, mess, ahm, but it's all positive for their learning. It's a different way of teaching but an enjoyable way of learning. Sometimes hard for the children to go back to normal teaching after we have done Aistear, little bit of an anticlimax.

I What is the role of the teacher in Aistear?

CIARA Well, I try and implement Aistear in my classroom for forty five minutes, three times a week. Ahm, I begin each session reading a big book, we have question and answer time. Then each group goes to their station and they begin working on the topic that week, for example, fire engines. I observe them, sometimes ask questions about their work or just give praise and a smile.

I In your opinion do you believe children really learn using a formal approach to learning?

CIARA Well, that's how we have been teaching education throughout the years, isn't it, formal education. At infant age I feel they should be in a play environment. Yes, they learn using a formal approach, but is it just filling them with information? Learning through play is more enjoyable, therefore learning comes easier and quicker to them. They question, reason, collaborate, peer learning, investigate, the list goes on. They learn both ways, but I favour play-based learning, I think it's a natural way of learning and the results are longlasting.

I What types of play do you believe are most beneficial for children's learning?

CIARA All types of play are necessary for children's learning and development. I feel there isn't enough of outdoor play, I'm guilty of that myself, but children need to develop their fine motor and gross motor skills, their cognitive development, social development and emotional development through all types of play for a holistic development.

I What are the benefits for using a play-based approach from the teacher's perspective?

CIARA Children want to learn, ahm, they enjoy learning and see you (the teacher) as more approachable. I find through play, the children talk more openly, tell you what's going on in their lives and sometimes ask you what's going on in yours, a two way relationship.

I Do you think that there are issues and/or opportunities with integrating Aistear into the curriculum?

CIARA Children have a right to play, so by not engaging in play I'm neglecting that right. All children have different learning styles and abilities, not all children are academics, through play all children learn and develop at their own pace and without any inhibitions.

I How could you enhance the provision of play in the infant classroom?

CIARA Reorganise my classroom to accommodate for play. Engage more freely with the children in their play, ahm, role-play etc. I could plan for more outdoor play and things like potting and planting, depending on the season. I'm sure there is lots I could do to enhance children's play, but it's still hard to get away from the usual teaching method of telling them what to do, tidy up and sit down. Routine I suppose!

I How do you assess and record progress made during play?

CIARA Ok, observations and notes on particular children's development where issues have arisen. Sample of children's handwriting from the start of the year to Christmas would be documented. Photos of art etc would be posted on the picture wall. That's it really.

I Any other comments?

CIARA Just maybe to give infant teachers' resources on play-based activities in the infant classroom and condense Aistear to a user guide for infant teachers' only.

I Thank you so much for your time in participating in this interview!

CIARA Enjoyed it!

I = Interviewer

CIARA = Respondent 4

Interview held on Friday 4th April, 2014.

Transcribed on Saturday 5th April, 2014.

APPENDIX 7

FOCUS GROUP SESSION QUESTIONS

PRE-FOCUS GROUP, SESSION 1

The following questions will serve as a basis for the focus group discussion:

Please share with the group your name, school, and experience teaching.

Please share experiences that you have had with Aistear in your classroom.

What barriers could transpire when integrating Aistear into your classroom?

Is there a way of supporting play-based learning approach in the classroom?

POST-FOCUS GROUP, SESSION 2

The following questions will serve as a basis for the focus group discussion:

Please share with the group your name, school, and experience teaching.

Please share experiences that you have had with Aistear in your classroom.

What barriers could transpire when integrating Aistear into your classroom?

Is there a way of supporting play-based learning approach in the classroom?

PRE-FOCUS GROUP, SESSION 1

DATE: 01ST OCTOBER 2015

I: Please share with the group your name, school, and experience teaching.

P2: Hi my name is Ella and I teach at _____ for two years.

P4: Hi everyone I'm Ciara and I teach at _____ and I've been teaching for twenty years now.

P3: Evening everyone, I'm Dawn, I teach at _____ for nine years.

P1: Hello, I'm Amy, I teach at _____ for six years now.

I: Thanks to everyone for participating in this focus group session, you have all signed the consent form.

P4: I have.

P2: I have it signed too.

P3: Yes, I have.

P1: I signed too.

I: Please share experiences that you have had with Aistear in your classroom.

P4: I'll start if that is ok. I feel Aistear is supposed to be informal and the PSC is very structured, how can you integrate the two, I think it's giving children mixed messages, freedom for an hour of Aistear and back to formal education for the remainder of the day. I am trying to merge the knowledge from Aistear together with the primary school curriculum to deliver my lessons. But I have to say it is not easy as it requires a great deal of work on my part it comes to planning, particularly since it encourages integrating subjects, this is a huge challenge. But you know, the results are very hopeful and as a result I get reassurance when using Aistear. I think in the long term it is actually going to have a great effect in the way children will be taught.

- P2:** I feel Aistear teaches children to partake in play and to work in partnership. I can see how play can enhance the self-assurance of the child. Since I started using elements of Aistear, I have definitely seen children's communication has developed and they have confidence in their interactions and social skills. Also I have found since using Aistear children's concentration and imagination is promoted. Through role-play children's literacy skills have really developed.
- P3:** The PSC involves us having subjects in the primary school curriculum which are taught in a structured way. But with Aistear, we are told to bring these together and teach them simultaneously. It's difficult I think, but then when you see the children engaged in play freely, you feel it is a good way. Well, to me Aistear encourages children's participation and turn-taking skills rather than a question and answer session. I suppose developing their social skills through interactions, modelling, participation, skills for life really, life skills to grow into confident and competent adults.
- P1:** I have to agree with that. I feel Aistear provides children the possibility to socialise with children they might not have played with before. I agree also that social development and interactions with class peers were a positive element during 'Aistear time'. Also I think Aistear is important because of the opportunity it allows children to freely play on their own and at the same time are learning as they engage in play. The children really enjoy playing and so Aistear is a benefit for children's learning.
- I:** Thank you all for those responses, second question:
What barriers could transpire when integrating Aistear into your classroom?
- P1:** Oh I'll start this off! Well firstly, the Aistear handbook was overwhelming, it covered childcare facilities, preschools but nothing practical or realistic about preparing the infant class for a theme or pointers on what resources to be used. Secondly, I've thirty boys in the classroom as well as furniture and equipment, where to store resources is an absolute nightmare. I feel teacher education in Aistear and infant education was not practical, a play-based framework to work with a structured curriculum. I find it can be hard to keep lessons new and keep children motivated. I find it's a bit of a challenge to make sure you have enough time for play and it's the right type of play. Aistear tells us what we should be doing, but there is no actually practical information for us to follow.

- P4:** Well my issue it time, I find planning for Aistear is time consuming. What more is required of us, do the PSC, Aistear, organise resources, prepare stations, it just goes on. Also, as well as time being a challenge, planning is another challenge for me. There is a big move on how I plan my lessons now. Usually I would have all the subjects planned for the months. But now I'm trying to implement Aistear, it takes time from other subjects. You have to look at your plan, start from the very beginning and integrate all of the PSC subjects Aistear. It takes a lot of time for me to plan and prepare my lessons. I have to try and get all the subjects in the curriculum covered within Aistear. It is time consuming.
- P2:** Oh, barriers, there's too much going on before I even get started. I feel I'm working with two curriculums, Aistear I feel is more focused on crèches. I also struggle with time issues, how can I blend in all the recommended time allocations for each subject and by some means provide an hour to Aistear play on a daily basis. I suppose in a way I am a bit anxious about the whole idea of using play as a way of teaching children. I think it's because we come from a teacher centred curriculum and now we have a play framework to incorporate. It's all a bit too much as in planning, creating activities, finding resources and making resources. While I'm at it I have to mention the lack of space I have in my classroom, it's cluttered as it is and now I have to set up stations for children's learning, we barely have room to move, so really my barriers are time, planning, resources and space.
- P3:** Actually time is one of my barriers also. I've a chaotic schedule every day, trying to find time to prepare for Aistear and set up the room, it's crazy. You know I find that the school day for infant level students is short enough without scheduling an hour for play. Also training in relation to barriers is another issue I have. I was told to do an Aistear course outside of school time and then come back to the classroom and implement what we had learnt. It's not that simple to do, there is overload in Aistear. Another challenge for me personally is the issues of classroom management. I am alone in the classroom. You need someone to help you in the class, but if you don't have someone, it becomes very difficult.
- I:** Finally the last question:
Is there a way of supporting play-based learning approach in the classroom?

- P2:** Personally I think we need a lot of resources because we have these learning centres and for these centres are not sufficiently resourced, children will soon lose concentration. So yes, resources are required. Also teachers need to be properly familiarised on the use of Aistear in their classrooms. We need money to get resources for children's play. Saying that I would say play-based learning is very important in the classroom because it allows or gives children time to interact and play in a natural way. This promotes communication skills and conflict resolution amongst themselves. With the availability of resources, I think children will learn more from this Aistear.
- P3:** I feel it was hard to remember the impact early years modules had on them in their training. A lot of outside reading was done on my behalf to understand how children learn through play. During Aistear I have noticed it teaches co-operative behaviour and promotes turn-taking so progression of these skills would be huge for me. Also for the teacher, there is an awful lot of work in preparation. I don't know how you are supposed to plan. If we were allocated a classroom assistance this would be a huge support in the delivery of Aistear. I really think we are trying to implement Aistear, but it is a lot of work for us.
- P4:** Well just to say I have noticed that through Aistear children have begun to take care of their own possessions and to have respect for others belongings. They have become more conscious that everything has a place in the classroom. This I feel is huge for developing their autonomy skills. I also think teachers need some type of professional development, some type of training that is very important to me. I suppose teachers really need to come to the understanding that learning is integrated in the classroom, but I don't really think that we have picked up on this fully. Having a real resourced class is a huge thing on my list. To provide children with really good developmental resources to encourage and develop their holistic is crucial.
- P1:** Sometimes to get involved in children's play you have to take on the character, put on various voices and genuinely get absorbed in the play for children to see the teacher enthusiastically taking part in the play, I suppose you could call it modelling. I feel I need to develop my confidence in this area that is my own personal need. To support Aistear in the classroom I would like to see professional development courses to give teachers a better understanding of Aistear and a guide to activities that we could integrate with the PSC. Also I feel

we need lots and lots of resources, money, storage and space if Aistear is to be correctly implemented into the infant classes.

I: Thank you all for participating in this focus group session, you have been very generous and accommodating with your time. Thank you again.

POST-FOCUS GROUP, SESSION 2

DATE: 02ND DECEMBER 2015

I: Please share with the group your name, school, and experience teaching.

P2: Hi my name is Ella and I teach at _____ for two years.

P4: Hi everyone I'm Ciara and I teach at _____ and I've been teaching for twenty years now.

P3: Hi, I'm Dawn, I teach at _____ for nine years.

P1: I'm Amy, I teach at _____ for six years now.

I: Thanks to everyone for participating in this post-focus group session 2, have you all signed the consent form.

P4: Yes I have.

P2: Also signed.

P3: Yes, I signed it when I came in.

P1: I signed too.

I: Please share experiences that you have had with Aistear in your classroom.

P4: Since our initial focus group session, things have changed for me, not a huge change but small changes. I am really focusing on the themed schedule as a guide for my planning Aistear into the PSC. I really feel for me, personally by having this themed schedule has been a huge guide for my planning, ahm, a crutch I suppose. Also since the training sessions, I now can see that children were supported to be "challenged" by Aistear for their learning and development. Aistear has really developed children's participation and contribution in activities, but the real change for me, is the change in children's turn-taking and sharing skills.

P2: Yeah, I have been using the themed schedule religiously also. I found it very hands on when I was preparing lesson plans on my own instead of having the support of our training sessions. Aistear time is now flowing and finds the themes for play template really good to guide planning and organisation of 'Aistear time'. Ahm, I suppose

confidence is growing and having a lesson guide is also really beneficial to my planning and organising for Aistear in my classroom.

P3: Since our training sessions, I can see the links between Aistear and the PSC, I feel I have to me more open to the integration of both, but before the training sessions I would not have been as open to linking Aistear with the PSC. I try to be more adventurous and imaginative with possibilities for children's learning. Trying to get my head around the new language curriculum has encouraged me to link elements of Aistear into the language curriculum. Each play session enhanced children's oral language skills using both literacy and numeracy language without restrictions. It's really having the confidence in myself and embracing change.

P1: I have to agree with the other participants, since the training sessions I have found the themed schedule really useful to follow, but it's still time consuming organising resources. The lesson plans dealing with the four themes and addressing one aim and one learning goal has made my planning easier, instead of trying to incorporate all aims and learning goals at one time. I am now linking Aistear more easily to different curriculum areas of the PSC. As mentioned earlier, I'm also making links between the new language curriculum and Aistear.

I: Thank you all for those responses, second question:

What barriers could transpire when integrating Aistear into your classroom?

P1: During 'Aistear time' I encouraged them to think at a "higher level". Now I am beginning to really focus on the children's learning through play, not all children can reach this "higher level", this is where scaffolding, demonstrating and questioning comes to play.

P4: My planning is still an issue for me, I am trying to integrate both but it's still time consuming. I am finding the themed schedule and sample lesson plans a huge assistance for my planning and organising of play.

P2: Play-based pedagogy provided children a "genuine incentive" to use these skills, but some children may need more assistance or to work at a slower pace. Observing children more allows me to identify if there are barriers for children through Aistear in my classroom.

P3: Barriers when integrating Aistear into the classroom, I suppose the challenge I encountered are changes within myself, the way I think about play and engage in play activities. Since the training sessions I listen more to the children during their play, sometimes I want to jump in and change things because I would do it

differently, but I'm learning that there is no right or wrong way during play, I suppose change my role as a teacher and become an observer or helper. Also another challenge for me is the fact the principal bought lots of new play-material for the 'Aistear hour' only!

I: Finally the last question:

Is there a way of supporting play-based learning approach in the classroom?

P2: I suppose all of the above comments support play-based learning approaches in the classroom and sharing of ideas and materials.

P3: Supporting play-based learning approaches in the classroom is about the potential for every child to be challenged at their personal level. Also, having gone through this experience I'm now more confident in my thinking and creativity, I also feel I have support with the other teachers to keep in touch and talk about what's working and not, a support network.

P4: Yeah, really again all of the above comments support play-based learning in the classroom and collaboration of ideas with other infant teachers.

P1: I can support play-based learning in my classroom by ensuring children can freely collaborate with each other and this will encourage the use and development of all skills.

I: Thank you all for participating in this focus group session, you have been very generous and accommodating with your time. Thank you again.

APPENDIX 8

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS, PHASE 1

Small Group Learning Experiences – Planning Sheet			
Date:	31 st / 3 / 14	Educator:	Ella
Time:	11:00-12:00		
Composition of group:			
The rationale for the group formation, number and gender of group members. 5 children — 2 boys + 3 girls			
Aims/learning goals, themes:			
What is the aim of the learning experience, what are the key learning goals to be achieved by the children? How does that link to Aistear? Aim: going to a shop to buy something goals: how to interact with someone when buying an item. Aistear link: Drama / Role-play / Turn-taking			
Learning experience:			
Describe the first-hand learning experience that will meet these aims and where it will take place. 1. How to meet + greet someone in a shop. 2. How to ask for something . Role-play area			
Source of ideas/rationale:			
What children's interest, literature, event or experience inspired this learning experience idea and why? Children pretending they are going on their holidays, they need new shoes.			
Resources:			
What resources are needed to conduct the learning experience? shoe boxes Bags Debit / Credit Cards shoes Money Till Handbags			
Preparation:			
What needs to be done in advance to ensure the learning experience runs smoothly? How are the children prepared? How can it be ensured that the learning experience is cognitively challenging? Have role-play area set-up as was. Tom's interaction with teacher was very interesting. Tom asked clear direct questions			
Key vocabulary:			
What are the key words which will be used in this learning experience? pair red shoes buy fit size			

Interaction strategies:	
What interaction strategies will be used (e.g. scaffolding, demonstration, open-ended questioning, facilitating thinking, other...)? How can the children be engaged in extended authentic conversation?	
Process:	
Beginning	Tom began the interaction
Middle	Tom & teacher engage in a conversation
End	Buy's blue shoes (teacher) and leaves.
Evaluation:	
How did the learning experience go overall? What did children say about the learning experience? What did staff say? Were the learning goals met? What did the children learn? What did staff learn? What would be done differently next time?	
<p>Lovely flow of language, Tom said exactly what he felt. Tom knew his colours & size (12). This scene was to Tom a real situation which he experienced when his mum bought him shoes for his birthday.</p>	
Extension/Follow up learning experiences:	
How can we capitalise on the children's learning and extend the learning experience? What will be planned for the future based on the observations and evaluation of the children's responses to the learning experience?	

Small Group Learning Experiences – Planning Sheet			
Date:	27/3/2014	Educator:	Amy
		Time:	9:30-10:30
Composition of group: 6			
The rationale for the group formation, number and gender of group members. 6 boys at role-play area.			
Aims/learning goals, themes:			
What is the aim of the learning experience, what are the key learning goals to be achieved by the children? How does that link to Aistear?			
Aim: learn about food goal: create a role-play in relation to food. Aistear link: Play/drama/Communication/Literacy			
Learning experience:			
Describe the first-hand learning experience that will meet these aims and where it will take place. Children learn about different foods, how we make food, how to prepare food. Role-play area.			
Source of ideas/rationale:			
What children's interest, literature, event or experience inspired this learning experience idea and why? One boy had helped his mum to make a pizza, he was showing the other boys how to make pizza and then pasta.			
Resources:			
What resources are needed to conduct the learning experience? Kitchen equipment. Chef's hat and apron			
Preparation:			
What needs to be done in advance to ensure the learning experience runs smoothly? How are the children prepared? How can it be ensured that the learning experience is cognitively challenging? Set-up role-play area prepared beforehand. Boys were asking questions about the pizza and different toppings.			
Key vocabulary:			
What are the key words which will be used in this learning experience? Pizza bake dough pasta toppings crust oven			

Interaction strategies:	
What interaction strategies will be used (e.g. scaffolding, demonstration, open-ended questioning, facilitating thinking, other...)? How can the children be engaged in extended authentic conversation?	
Teacher asked open-ended questions - what are you making?	
Process:	
Beginning	"Chef" took control of his role immediately by explaining how to make pizza.
Middle	Developed when children asked questions. Teacher got involved asking questions.
End	Ended quickly as time was up and children had to tidy up.
Evaluation:	
How did the learning experience go overall? What did children say about the learning experience? What did staff say? Were the learning goals met? What did the children learn? What did staff learn? What would be done differently next time?	
lovely role-play - rich in language, good oral communication, children explored how to make pizza + pasta using kitchen equipment + playdough. Role-play costumes complimented this scene	
Extension/Follow up learning experiences:	
How can we capitalise on the children's learning and extend the learning experience? What will be planned for the future based on the observations and evaluation of the children's responses to the learning experience?	
Explore Kitchens in a hospital, hotel, factory. Differences, Similarities.	

Small Group Learning Experiences – Planning Sheet			
Date:	3/4/2014	Educator:	Dawn
		Time:	9:30-10:30
Composition of group:			
The rationale for the group formation, number and gender of group members.			
4 girls			
Aims/learning goals, themes:			
What is the aim of the learning experience, what are the key learning goals to be achieved by the children? How does that link to Aistear?			
Aim: Learning about transport. Goal: Create a drama from the story 'If I built a car' Aistear link: language skills building new vocab.			
Learning experience:			
Describe the first-hand learning experience that will meet these aims and where it will take place.			
Socio-dramatic area. Re-creating story into a role-play.			
Source of ideas/rationale:			
What children's interest, literature, event or experience inspired this learning experience idea and why?			
Just heard a story about cars. Teacher + children arrange chairs as cars in the story. Teacher began the drama about being hungry – who's turn is it to cook tonight?			
Resources:			
What resources are needed to conduct the learning experience?			
Chairs representing a car.			
Preparation:			
What needs to be done in advance to ensure the learning experience runs smoothly? How are the children prepared? How can it be ensured that the learning experience is cognitively challenging?			
Teacher arranged the socio-dramatic area with the children's help. lovely communication between teacher / Lucy / Lauren			
Key vocabulary:			
What are the key words which will be used in this learning experience?			
garage starving trip cars cook holiday home journey			

Interaction strategies:	
What interaction strategies will be used (e.g. scaffolding, demonstration, open-ended questioning, facilitating thinking, other...)? How can the children be engaged in extended authentic conversation? good communication skills between teacher and girls. Open-ended questions	
Process:	
Beginning	Teacher led
Middle	Interaction & communication 'Real' with with hansen, Lucy & teacher.
End	Ends when they arrive at their destination.
Evaluation:	
How did the learning experience go overall? What did children say about the learning experience? What did staff say? Were the learning goals met? What did the children learn? What did staff learn? What would be done differently next time? Dawn changed the direction of the role-play. Children played their parts very well by asking and answering questions.	
Extension/Follow up learning experiences:	
How can we capitalise on the children's learning and extend the learning experience? What will be planned for the future based on the observations and evaluation of the children's responses to the learning experience?	

Small Group Learning Experiences – Planning Sheet			
Date:	7/4/2014	Educator:	Ciaha
Time:	11:00-12:00		
Composition of group: 4			
The rationale for the group formation, number and gender of group members. 4 in group - 2 boys, 2 girls.			
Aims/learning goals, themes:			
What is the aim of the learning experience, what are the key learning goals to be achieved by the children? How does that link to Aistear? Aim - learn about animals. Making passes for zoo goal - write words on passes/tickets. Aistear link: Communication / Language / Literacy /			
Learning experience:			
Describe the first-hand learning experience that will meet these aims and where it will take place. Role-play area - Restaurant at zoo. Making passes to get food. Kate asks teacher to spell burger - teacher assists. 4 children busy writing words on tickets / passes.			
Source of ideas/rationale:			
What children's interest, literature, event or experience inspired this learning experience idea and why? Play theme for the week is animals.			
Resources:			
What resources are needed to conduct the learning experience? Coloured pieces of card, pencils			
Preparation:			
What needs to be done in advance to ensure the learning experience runs smoothly? How are the children prepared? How can it be ensured that the learning experience is cognitively challenging? Cards and pencils were already on desk before children began activity. Children knew the theme and teacher helped organise their props. children didn't know how to spell some words.			
Key vocabulary:			
What are the key words which will be used in this learning experience? Food pass Burger Restaurant Tickets Zoo Passes			

Interaction strategies:	
What interaction strategies will be used (e.g. scaffolding, demonstration, open-ended questioning, facilitating thinking, other...)? How can the children be engaged in extended authentic conversation?	
Teacher demonstrated spelling the word burger, then wrote it. Teacher used open-ended questions – What's this ticket for?	
Process:	
Beginning	Clear instructions on activity
Middle	Interaction with teacher and child. Role-play interaction
End	Ended role-play interaction, teacher continued observing other groups.
Evaluation:	
How did the learning experience go overall? What did children say about the learning experience? What did staff say? Were the learning goals met? What did the children learn? What did staff learn? What would be done differently next time?	
Learning experience went very well. Children enjoyed the role-play experience, worked well together. Children learnt how to make passes for the zoo, passes for the restaurant, talked about different animals and foods.	
Extension/Follow up learning experiences:	
How can we capitalise on the children's learning and extend the learning experience? What will be planned for the future based on the observations and evaluation of the children's responses to the learning experience?	

APPENDIX 9

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION PHASE 2

Small Group Learning Experiences – Planning Sheet			
Date:	7.4.2014	Educator:	Ciaha
		Time:	11-12
Composition of group:			
The rationale for the group formation, number and gender of group members.			
6 children – boys & girls – 4 boys and 2 girls			
Aims/learning goals, themes:			
What is the aim of the learning experience, what are the key learning goals to be achieved by the children? How does that link to Aistear?			
Supermarket scene – buying food for dinner. Communicating – Aim 2 – children will use language – Learning goal 4.			
Learning experience:			
Describe the first-hand learning experience that will meet these aims and where it will take place.			
How to communicate as a group. Identify different types of fruit and vegetables			
Source of ideas/rationale:			
What children's interest, literature, event or experience inspired this learning experience idea and why?			
They had done an activity on healthy eating and the food pyramid.			
Resources:			
What resources are needed to conduct the learning experience?			
Vegetables } pretend or real. Fruit } Basket, money, shopping bags Till			
Preparation:			
What needs to be done in advance to ensure the learning experience runs smoothly? How are the children prepared? How can it be ensured that the learning experience is cognitively challenging?			
Have the play area equipped with the above resources.			
Key vocabulary:			
What are the key words which will be used in this learning experience?			
How much are.... 'Change', Cash, Card, Shopping list			

Interaction strategies:	
What interaction strategies will be used (e.g. scaffolding, demonstration, open-ended questioning, facilitating thinking, other...)? How can the children be engaged in extended authentic conversation?	
Children decided to use mega blocks to represent fruit + vegetables, orange mega blocks - carrots, green mega blocks - apples + pears.	
Process:	
Beginning	Children decided to create their own types of fruit + vegetable through the use of coloured mega blocks
Middle	Teacher made a suggestion to draw the different fruits + vegetable and stick them to the wall.
End	When teacher interrupted children's play the pretend element was gone. This activity had been child initiated + the teacher led.
Evaluation:	
How did the learning experience go overall? What did children say about the learning experience? What did staff say? Were the learning goals met? What did the children learn? What did staff learn? What would be done differently next time?	
The children used their imagination when representing different fruits and vegetables with mega blocks. Teacher paused their play by suggesting they draw the fruits and vegetables to represent them.	
Extension/Follow up learning experiences:	
How can we capitalise on the children's learning and extend the learning experience? What will be planned for the future based on the observations and evaluation of the children's responses to the learning experience?	
Children could have continued their pretend play and as a continuation for another activity draw the fruits and vegetables to represent them and place them near the items.	

Small Group Learning Experiences – Planning Sheet			
Date:	31. 03. 2014	Educator:	Ella
		Time:	11:00 – 12:00
Composition of group:			
The rationale for the group formation, number and gender of group members.			
Free-play – Mixed – 20 children			
Aims/learning goals, themes:			
What is the aim of the learning experience, what are the key learning goals to be achieved by the children? How does that link to Aistear?			
Engaged in free-play – Well-being – Aim 3 Learning goal 2 – express themselves through a variety of types of play.			
Learning experience:			
Describe the first-hand learning experience that will meet these aims and where it will take place.			
Takes place in the junior & senior infant classroom.			
Source of ideas/rationale:			
What children's interest, literature, event or experience inspired this learning experience idea and why?			
Free-play allows children to discover new strengths & abilities.			
Resources:			
What resources are needed to conduct the learning experience?			
All materials and resources in the junior & senior infant classroom			
Preparation:			
What needs to be done in advance to ensure the learning experience runs smoothly? How are the children prepared? How can it be ensured that the learning experience is cognitively challenging?			
Children told it was free-play time and they went to areas that they wanted to.			
Key vocabulary:			
What are the key words which will be used in this learning experience?			
free-play communicate relationships discovered problem-solve teamwork			

Interaction strategies:	
What interaction strategies will be used (e.g. scaffolding, demonstration, open-ended questioning, facilitating thinking, other...)? How can the children be engaged in extended authentic conversation?	
If children need teacher they can approach her. Children interact with other children. Teacher observed a boy playing on his own.	
Process:	
Beginning	Teacher approached boy and asked what he was after making. He said a dinosaur out of Lego.
Middle	Another boy who had been listening approached teacher & the boy.
End	The second boy had said he had a book about dinosaurs, did he want to see it. Teacher left the two boys looking at dinosaurs.
Evaluation:	
How did the learning experience go overall? What did children say about the learning experience? What did staff say? Were the learning goals met? What did the children learn? What did staff learn? What would be done differently next time?	
Teacher was in the uninvolved role during this activity. She communicated with the boy about what he made. When another boy joined the conversation, teacher left the situation and let the two boys continue looking at the dinosaur together.	
Extension/Follow up learning experiences:	
How can we capitalise on the children's learning and extend the learning experience? What will be planned for the future based on the observations and evaluation of the children's responses to the learning experience?	
Different types of dinosaurs - what would they eat Art work - draw different types of dinosaurs, using different art materials. eg feathers, egg shells...	

Small Group Learning Experiences – Planning Sheet			
Date:	03.04.2014	Educator:	Dawn
		Time:	9:30-10:30
Composition of group:			
The rationale for the group formation, number and gender of group members.			
2 girls playing doctors & nurses.			
Aims/learning goals, themes:			
What is the aim of the learning experience, what are the key learning goals to be achieved by the children? How does that link to Aistear?			
Learning experience – Real life experience Learning goal: engage, explore their environment. Exploring + Thinking – Aim 1, learning goal 1.			
Learning experience:			
Describe the first-hand learning experience that will meet these aims and where it will take place.			
Understand what an x-ray is, how an x-ray is taken and why have an x-ray. Activity at dramatic play area.			
Source of ideas/rationale:			
What children's interest, literature, event or experience inspired this learning experience idea and why?			
Children were told a story about Pedro Pony who was ill and had to go to hospital previously.			
Resources:			
What resources are needed to conduct the learning experience?			
Black sheet of art paper. Mask, gloves, plastic apron			
Preparation:			
What needs to be done in advance to ensure the learning experience runs smoothly? How are the children prepared? How can it be ensured that the learning experience is cognitively challenging?			
Supply art paper. Told story of Pedro Pony in hospital.			
Key vocabulary:			
What are the key words which will be used in this learning experience?			
x-ray doctor bed bones hospital nurse picture			

Interaction strategies:	
What interaction strategies will be used (e.g. scaffolding, demonstration, open-ended questioning, facilitating thinking, other...)? How can the children be engaged in extended authentic conversation?	
Teacher was playing with a child demonstrating how to take an x-ray and then child took an x-ray of teachers hand.	
Process:	
Beginning	Teacher + child x-raying each others hand. Teacher demonstrated and then the child led.
Middle	Teacher asked child to x-ray another child's hand. She asked the other child but declined, she was drawing a picture.
End	
Evaluation:	
How did the learning experience go overall? What did children say about the learning experience? What did staff say? Were the learning goals met? What did the children learn? What did staff learn? What would be done differently next time?	
Teacher tried to develop communication and interaction between the two children. Regardless, the second child did not want to participate in the activity.	
Extension/Follow up learning experiences:	
How can we capitalise on the children's learning and extend the learning experience? What will be planned for the future based on the observations and evaluation of the children's responses to the learning experience?	
To extend the learning - talk about different parts of the body - different roles of people working in a hospital.	

Small Group Learning Experiences – Planning Sheet			
Date:	7.04.2014	Educator:	Ciana
		Time:	11.00 – 12.00
Composition of group:			
The rationale for the group formation, number and gender of group members.			
5 children in a group, 3 boys + 2 girls.			
Aims/learning goals, themes:			
What is the aim of the learning experience, what are the key learning goals to be achieved by the children? How does that link to Aistear?			
learning experience – find correct pieces for a jigsaw of 200 animals. All 4 themes of Aistear, Aim 4.			
Learning experience:			
Describe the first-hand learning experience that will meet these aims and where it will take place.			
learning experience take place at table with 5 children. – share ideas, thoughts + ideas, children will have positive attitudes about learning.			
Source of ideas/rationale:			
What children's interest, literature, event or experience inspired this learning experience idea and why?			
Children had previously been read a story about 200 animals. One of the children was going on a family trip to the zoo in Dublin.			
Resources:			
What resources are needed to conduct the learning experience?			
jigsaws table space small 200 animals			
Preparation:			
What needs to be done in advance to ensure the learning experience runs smoothly? How are the children prepared? How can it be ensured that the learning experience is cognitively challenging?			
Prepare the area by setting up various jigsaws. This is a continuation of a story about 200 animals been read to children.			
Key vocabulary:			
What are the key words which will be used in this learning experience?			
large animals different colours small animals different sounds			

Interaction strategies:	
What interaction strategies will be used (e.g. scaffolding, demonstration, open-ended questioning, facilitating thinking, other...)? How can the children be engaged in extended authentic conversation?	
Could use more open-ended questioning! When required, teacher took the role of stage manager to assist the play ran smoothly.	
Process:	
Beginning	Introduced the jigsaw activity.
Middle	Observed children looking for the correct pieces to fit.
End	Told children it was time to tidy up.
Evaluation:	
How did the learning experience go overall? What did children say about the learning experience? What did staff say? Were the learning goals met? What did the children learn? What did staff learn? What would be done differently next time?	
A boy wanted a jigsaw piece that his classmate was holding, she did not want to give it. Teacher intervened asking - are there other pieces you could use? Asked her to share (eventually did). Teacher guided children in their problem-solving skills.	
Extension/Follow up learning experiences:	
How can we capitalise on the children's learning and extend the learning experience? What will be planned for the future based on the observations and evaluation of the children's responses to the learning experience?	
Extend learning: Wild animals Farm animals Teacher linked activity to home by asking what animals they had.	

APPENDIX 10

SAMPLE OF REFLECTIVE DIARY ENTRY

Diary Entry Number 1

This was the least experienced teacher that I've interviewed out of the four teachers. This teacher is content with her ability as a teacher of junior and senior infants. She is making sense of Aistear, like the other infant teachers. This teacher isn't implementing the hour of Aistear as is recommended by the NCCA. The teacher feels an hour of play is perhaps a bit too long as other subjects have to be taught.

APPENDIX 11

ENVIRONMENTAL GUIDELINES

Environmental Guidelines

Identity & Belonging

Communicating	Learning Environment	Yes	No	Well-Being
	Defined learning areas			
	Children's works is displayed			
	Resources for play are easily reached			
	Outdoor play opportunities			
	Learning Interactions			
	Teacher imitates and reports what child says			
	Teacher comments on what children are doing at that time			
	Teacher encourages use of new words in their vocabulary – open questions			
	Learning Opportunities			
	Small group work facilitated by teacher			
	Opportunities for children to engage with teacher/peers			
	Inclusion of all children in small group activities			

Exploring and Thinking

APPENDIX 12

ADAPTED COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM OBSERVATION TOOL

LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: <i>This dimension involves the physical environment and learning context.</i>			NOTES
EXAMPLES			
The classroom is organised to emphasise open space. ^{1,4,5}			
Learning areas are clearly defined throughout the classroom. ^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,12}		Different learning areas, such as small world play, reading corner, maths area, construction, topic table, computer area are available within the classroom.	
Learning areas are clearly labelled with pictures/words throughout the classroom. ^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,12}		Symbols and pictures are used to label different areas, such as the kitchen and book areas.	
There is space for privacy or quiet areas where children can retreat to have 'down time' or engage in smaller group activities. These areas are less visually distracting. ^{1,3,4,5,6,7,8}		There is a big tent for children to go into with a book. A corner of the classroom has an entrance like a castle.	This item is specifically for quiet spaces. Classrooms may have spaces such as a house corner, hospital area, or growing station. While these are interesting learning areas, they do not get a score for this item.
Children's own work is displayed and labelled appropriately. ^{5,6,7,8}		Self-portraits with labels and descriptions. Children's drawings, potato prints.	
Some classroom displays include items that invite comments from children. ^{5,6,7,8}		Can you order your numbers here? How much did you enjoy our trip to the zoo? Children are encouraged to rate the trip using stars.	This item refers to displays which have space for children to contribute.
Book specific areas are available. ^{1,3,4,5,6,7,8}		Book displays, shelves within easy reach.	
Literacy specific areas are available. ^{1,3,4,5,6,7,8}		Desks with paper, whiteboards, pens and books to practise spelling, handwriting or reading.	Literacy specific areas may include materials for writing or practicing handwriting.
Background noise levels are managed consistently throughout the observation, and children and adults are able to hear one another with ease. ^{4,6,9,10,11}		Noise levels are managed well throughout the observation. Soft music playing in the background during free play.	
Transition times are managed effectively, so that noise levels are not excessive and children know what to expect next. ^{4,5,7,9,10,11}		The adult rings a bell and all children stop and put both hands in the air and wait for instructions. A tambourine is used to signal the children have to wait and listen for the next instruction.	
There is good light. ^{4,5,6,12}			
The majority of learning resources and materials are labelled with pictures/words. ^{4,5,6,7,13}			
Resources that are available for free play are easily reached by the children or easily within their line of vision. ^{4,5,6,7,8}		Blocks, play dough, toy animals, number lines within easy reach.	
An appropriate range of books is available in the book area (for example, traditional stories, bilingual/dual language books and a variety of genres and books related to children's own experiences). ¹³			
Non-fiction books, books on specific topics or interests of the children are also available in other learning areas. ¹³		Books on dinosaurs. Books on transportation. Space and the universe books and props.	
Outdoor play (if available) includes imaginative role play. ^{7,8,37}		Children dressed up as construction workers (hi vis jackets and hard hats) for break outside. Home corner available outdoors.	

Good quality toys, small world objects and real / natural resources are available. ^{1, 2,4,5,6,7,8,37}	Zoo toys, shells, pebbles, seeds. Castle set and toys related to topic.	
Musical instruments and noise makers are available. ^{1, 2,4,5,6,7,8,37}	Adult uses the tambourine to get children's attention. Adult plays the guitar during story time. Children take turns to use the wooden flutes while the adult reads a story. Concept of pitch is explored using bells.	
Role play area is available. ^{1, 2,4,5,6,7,8,37}	Kitchen area. Puppets and soft animals used for imaginary play. In the kitchen area there are different outfits for children to wear. Castle costumes in the class (e.g. knight and princess).	

LANGUAGE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES:

This dimension involves the structure opportunities that are present in the setting to support language development.

EXAMPLES	NOTES
Small group work facilitated by an adult takes place. ^{16, 17, 18, 19,58}	Phonics groups (children grouped by ability). Letter-sound matching activity within small groups. Counting practice group. Children complete spelling tasks, sitting on different tables according to ability (labelled by different animal names) with adult support.
Children have opportunities to engage in interactive book reading facilitated by an adult (for example: asking predictive questions, joining in with repetitions, story packs etc.). ^{14,15, 17, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32,58}	Teacher reads two books brought in by a child from home. During the reading she asks two questions ('Why would Mr Stick be scared of a dog?' 'What are baby butterflies?')
Children have opportunities to engage in structured conversations with teachers and other adults. ^{19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 33,34,58}	Adult sits at the free play tables and answer children's questions, comments on their activities, asks questions and follows up conversation. Children approach adult with news about family, adult asks questions and comments, relating to background knowledge of prior events. Show and Tell carpet time includes questions that require from the child to provide more information on the object.
Children have opportunities to engage in structured conversations with peers (Talking partners). ^{35, 36,58}	Children discuss a topic with the child sitting next to them during carpet time and give a joint answer to the whole-group. Children work in pairs – one describes a geographical shape while the other guesses which shape they are thinking of.
Attempts are made to actively include all children in small group activities. ^{23,37,58,62}	Less talkative children are identified by adults, who invite them to sit on their knee to have a conversation. Additional modification of language is used by adults to include less-talkative children in whole-class discussions.

LANGUAGE LEARNING INTERACTIONS:

This dimension involves the ways in which adults in the setting talk with children.

	EXAMPLES	NOTES
Adults use children's name, draw attention of children. 1,38,39,40,41,44,45,46,47	Adult says the name of each child before giving them a counting task (e.g. Sarah – 3+4!) During greetings at the start of the day. Adult uses the child's name to get their attention <i>before</i> asking them a specific question during 'show and tell' session.	If an adult does this repetitively during one activity (e.g. a counting task), but does not use this strategy during the rest of the session, you may wish to count the incidence as 'once' (rather than counting the individual occurrences within the one task).
Adults get down to the child's level when interacting with them. 1,38,39,40,41,44,45,46,47	Adult sits on the carpet with the children to complete maths activity. Adult sits on small chairs designed for children during free activity time.	
Natural gestures and some key word signing are used in interactions with children. 39,40,41,42,43,44,45,46,47	Thumbs up. Use a gesture for 'big' (tower). Use the 'where' Makaton sign. Gestured when saying 'I can see a long way'. Fingers to signal 3 hats. Five minutes (hand gesture for 5). Knock it over (gesture for knock!). When instructing in an ICT lesson, teachers use gestures for up/down/left/right/high/low. Iconic gestures are used, e.g. gesture for 'cliff' (in discussion of what an edge is in maths lesson).	
Adults use symbols, pictures and props (real objects) to reinforce language. ¹	Visual timetable displayed, with a focus on a child who has recently moved to the area from abroad and a child with ASD. Pointing at pictures when reading a story. Holding a wooden train toy and referring to it when talking about transportation.	
Pacing: Adults use a slow pace during conversation; give children plenty of time to respond and take turns in interacting with them. 1,19,21,34,39,40,41,44,45,46,47	When explaining how to log on to the computers, the adult takes lots of pauses and talks slowly.	
Pausing: Adults pause expectantly and frequently during interactions with children to encourage their turn-taking and active participation. 1,19,21,44,45,46,47	Counting activity '– 2, 4, 6!' A: 'How do we call this? It's a..... pancake!' A: 'What day is it today, do you know?... It was Monday yesterday so it's..... Today is - Tuesday!'	
Confirming: Adults respond to the majority of child utterances by confirming understanding of the child's intentions. Adults do not ignore child's communicative bids. 1,19,44,45,46,47,48	Adult confirms if answer to counting was correct? Child: 'My grandmother has rabbits in her garden'. Adult: 'That sounds interesting, tell me about the rabbits later' Child: 'Look Miss!' Adult: 'Oh look what you've done! He's made a car!' Child: 'Miss, look at my star!' Adult: 'Oh wow...this is a big bright star!'	

Imitating: Adults imitate and repeat what child says more or less exactly. ^{1,19,44,45,46,47,48}	Child: 'It is my sister's birthday on Saturday'. Adult: 'Is it really her birthday? How exciting?' Child: 'Miss look at my tower'. Adult: 'Oh wow...look at your tower!' Adult: 'Charlie, that's a great design'. Adult: 'A spider! Your favourite animal!' Adult: 'I like the way Alfie and Tiana put all the blocks together to build a really tall tower.' Adult: 'I can see what you're doing, you're trying to copy.' Child: 'Because Cinderella was scared of her sisters'. Adult: 'That's right. Cinderella was scared of her two horrible sisters'. Child: 'My mummy brought me here'. Adult: 'Your mummy's brought you here has she? She's seen you to the gate. Here she is!' Child: 'Chimney house'. Adult: 'Chimney that's like the one we saw when we went on our walk' Child: 'Look at my dress'. Adult: 'It's a very beautiful summer dress'. Child: 'I need to be careful'. Adult: 'That's right. You need to be precise' Adult: 'What's another word for punch? (Pause) Starts with 'h' Adult: 'When someone doesn't feel excited in a nice way, we say they feel...(pause) upset'. The adult describes the word octagon in relation to an octopus. Introduces the words pentagon, cylinder, cuboids, and cone.	In order to be scored, the adult's comment should be directed at the child(ren) and be about the immediate situation.
Commenting: Adults comment on what is happening or what children are doing at that time. ^{1,19,44,45,46,47,49,50,51}	Adult: 'I can see what you're doing, you're trying to copy.' Child: 'Because Cinderella was scared of her sisters'. Adult: 'That's right. Cinderella was scared of her two horrible sisters'. Child: 'My mummy brought me here'. Adult: 'Your mummy's brought you here has she? She's seen you to the gate. Here she is!' Child: 'Chimney house'. Adult: 'Chimney that's like the one we saw when we went on our walk' Child: 'Look at my dress'. Adult: 'It's a very beautiful summer dress'. Child: 'I need to be careful'. Adult: 'That's right. You need to be precise' Adult: 'What's another word for punch? (Pause) Starts with 'h' Adult: 'When someone doesn't feel excited in a nice way, we say they feel...(pause) upset'. The adult describes the word octagon in relation to an octopus. Introduces the words pentagon, cylinder, cuboids, and cone.	
Extending: Adults repeat what child says and add a small amount of syntactic or semantic information. ^{1,19,44,45,46,47,48,49,50,51}	Adult: 'I can see what you're doing, you're trying to copy.' Child: 'Because Cinderella was scared of her sisters'. Adult: 'That's right. Cinderella was scared of her two horrible sisters'. Child: 'My mummy brought me here'. Adult: 'Your mummy's brought you here has she? She's seen you to the gate. Here she is!' Child: 'Chimney house'. Adult: 'Chimney that's like the one we saw when we went on our walk' Child: 'Look at my dress'. Adult: 'It's a very beautiful summer dress'. Child: 'I need to be careful'. Adult: 'That's right. You need to be precise' Adult: 'What's another word for punch? (Pause) Starts with 'h' Adult: 'When someone doesn't feel excited in a nice way, we say they feel...(pause) upset'. The adult describes the word octagon in relation to an octopus. Introduces the words pentagon, cylinder, cuboids, and cone.	
Labelling: Adults provide the labels for familiar and unfamiliar actions, objects, or abstractions (e.g. feelings). ^{54,55,56,58,59,60}	Adult: 'I can see what you're doing, you're trying to copy.' Child: 'Because Cinderella was scared of her sisters'. Adult: 'That's right. Cinderella was scared of her two horrible sisters'. Child: 'My mummy brought me here'. Adult: 'Your mummy's brought you here has she? She's seen you to the gate. Here she is!' Child: 'Chimney house'. Adult: 'Chimney that's like the one we saw when we went on our walk' Child: 'Look at my dress'. Adult: 'It's a very beautiful summer dress'. Child: 'I need to be careful'. Adult: 'That's right. You need to be precise' Adult: 'What's another word for punch? (Pause) Starts with 'h' Adult: 'When someone doesn't feel excited in a nice way, we say they feel...(pause) upset'. The adult describes the word octagon in relation to an octopus. Introduces the words pentagon, cylinder, cuboids, and cone.	
Adults encourage children to use new words in their own talking. ^{54,55,56,58,59,60}	Adult: 'I can see what you're doing, you're trying to copy.' Child: 'Because Cinderella was scared of her sisters'. Adult: 'That's right. Cinderella was scared of her two horrible sisters'. Child: 'My mummy brought me here'. Adult: 'Your mummy's brought you here has she? She's seen you to the gate. Here she is!' Child: 'Chimney house'. Adult: 'Chimney that's like the one we saw when we went on our walk' Child: 'Look at my dress'. Adult: 'It's a very beautiful summer dress'. Child: 'I need to be careful'. Adult: 'That's right. You need to be precise' Adult: 'What's another word for punch? (Pause) Starts with 'h' Adult: 'When someone doesn't feel excited in a nice way, we say they feel...(pause) upset'. The adult describes the word octagon in relation to an octopus. Introduces the words pentagon, cylinder, cuboids, and cone.	
Open questioning: Adults ask open-ended questions that extend children's thinking (what, where, when, how & why questions). ^{1,19,44,45,46,47,52,53,57,58}	Adult: 'I can see what you're doing, you're trying to copy.' Child: 'Because Cinderella was scared of her sisters'. Adult: 'That's right. Cinderella was scared of her two horrible sisters'. Child: 'My mummy brought me here'. Adult: 'Your mummy's brought you here has she? She's seen you to the gate. Here she is!' Child: 'Chimney house'. Adult: 'Chimney that's like the one we saw when we went on our walk' Child: 'Look at my dress'. Adult: 'It's a very beautiful summer dress'. Child: 'I need to be careful'. Adult: 'That's right. You need to be precise' Adult: 'What's another word for punch? (Pause) Starts with 'h' Adult: 'When someone doesn't feel excited in a nice way, we say they feel...(pause) upset'. The adult describes the word octagon in relation to an octopus. Introduces the words pentagon, cylinder, cuboids, and cone.	
Scripting: Adults provide a verbal routine to the child for representing an activity (e.g. First, you go up to the counter. Then you say 'I want milk..') and engage the child in known routines (e.g. 'Now it is time for circle time. What do we do first?'). ^{1,19,44,45,46,47,58}	Adult: 'I can see what you're doing, you're trying to copy.' Child: 'Because Cinderella was scared of her sisters'. Adult: 'That's right. Cinderella was scared of her two horrible sisters'. Child: 'My mummy brought me here'. Adult: 'Your mummy's brought you here has she? She's seen you to the gate. Here she is!' Child: 'Chimney house'. Adult: 'Chimney that's like the one we saw when we went on our walk' Child: 'Look at my dress'. Adult: 'It's a very beautiful summer dress'. Child: 'I need to be careful'. Adult: 'That's right. You need to be precise' Adult: 'What's another word for punch? (Pause) Starts with 'h' Adult: 'When someone doesn't feel excited in a nice way, we say they feel...(pause) upset'. The adult describes the word octagon in relation to an octopus. Introduces the words pentagon, cylinder, cuboids, and cone.	Scripts provide children with accurate verbal information about those situations or activities they may encounter. The situation or activity is described in detail providing the child with a script of what to say or do, what might be expected of him them and why. This item should not be scored if the adult just gives directions (e.g. Adult: 'Now go to your tables and start the task').
Adults provide children with choices (for example: 'Would you like to read a story or play on the computer?'). ¹	Adult: 'I can see what you're doing, you're trying to copy.' Child: 'Because Cinderella was scared of her sisters'. Adult: 'That's right. Cinderella was scared of her two horrible sisters'. Child: 'My mummy brought me here'. Adult: 'Your mummy's brought you here has she? She's seen you to the gate. Here she is!' Child: 'Chimney house'. Adult: 'Chimney that's like the one we saw when we went on our walk' Child: 'Look at my dress'. Adult: 'It's a very beautiful summer dress'. Child: 'I need to be careful'. Adult: 'That's right. You need to be precise' Adult: 'What's another word for punch? (Pause) Starts with 'h' Adult: 'When someone doesn't feel excited in a nice way, we say they feel...(pause) upset'. The adult describes the word octagon in relation to an octopus. Introduces the words pentagon, cylinder, cuboids, and cone.	Do you want to go outside or go on the computer? Do you want to show us a magic trick or tell us about last night (in Show and Tell)? Amphibian crafts versus hovercrafts! Smaller v smallest. That's not just a car, it's like a minibus! Hammer doesn't start with d, that would be dammer
Adults use contrasts that highlight differences in lexical items and in syntactic structures. ^{51,54,55,56,58,59,60,61}	Adult: 'I can see what you're doing, you're trying to copy.' Child: 'Because Cinderella was scared of her sisters'. Adult: 'That's right. Cinderella was scared of her two horrible sisters'. Child: 'My mummy brought me here'. Adult: 'Your mummy's brought you here has she? She's seen you to the gate. Here she is!' Child: 'Chimney house'. Adult: 'Chimney that's like the one we saw when we went on our walk' Child: 'Look at my dress'. Adult: 'It's a very beautiful summer dress'. Child: 'I need to be careful'. Adult: 'That's right. You need to be precise' Adult: 'What's another word for punch? (Pause) Starts with 'h' Adult: 'When someone doesn't feel excited in a nice way, we say they feel...(pause) upset'. The adult describes the word octagon in relation to an octopus. Introduces the words pentagon, cylinder, cuboids, and cone.	

	<p>The adult explains to the children the meaning of the words content and index.</p> <p>Face versus Side</p> <p>Sophia versus spear versus sphere!</p> <p>Discusses a face of a circle versus a face of a 2d shape in maths.</p> <p>What are the properties of the shape?</p>	
Adults model language that the children are not producing yet. ³⁸		Adults may use a word or sentence structure which you would not expect of a child in key stage 1. In order to score on this item, consider if the adult is using language which is within the child's zone of proximal development – e.g. is the language use helping develop children's language skills? Or is it too complex to be accessed by children of this age range (in which case, do not score a point)?
Turn-taking is encouraged. ^{1,62}	<p>Adult: 'We are working as a team - doing it all together. Now it's my turn, then it's Amber's turn.'</p> <p>Adult: 'Let's take it in turns to think of a word to describe the monster.'</p>	
Children's listening skills are praised. ^{1,62}	<p>Adult: 'That's very good listening.'</p> <p>Adult: 'I can tell you are listening to me by the way you all look at me when I explain the task. Great listening!'</p>	This item is scored if listening is explicitly praised. It does not include praise for being quiet (e.g. 'this class is really quiet – good work' would not be scored) or discipline for poor listening (e.g. 'I wish there was more listening going on in here today!'). You may wish to note any positive strategies that the adults use to encourage good listening.
Children's non-verbal communication is praised. ^{1,62}	Adults: 'I like the way you look at me when I explain the exercise. It makes me think you are really listening at me'	

APPENDIX 13

LEARNING AIMS AND GOALS OF AISTEAR



Table 1: Aims and learning goals for *Well-being*

Well-being	
Aims	Learning goals
Aim 1 Children will be strong psychologically and socially.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. make strong attachments and develop warm and supportive relationships with family, peers and adults in out-of-home settings and in their community 2. be aware of and name their own feelings, and understand that others may have different feelings 3. handle transitions and changes well 4. be confident and self-reliant 5. respect themselves, others and the environment 6. make decisions and choices about their own learning and development.
Aim 2 Children will be as healthy and fit as they can be.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. gain increasing control and co-ordination of body movements 2. be aware of their bodies, their bodily functions, and their changing abilities 3. discover, explore and refine gross and fine motor skills 4. use self-help skills in caring for their own bodies 5. show good judgement when taking risks 6. make healthy choices and demonstrate positive attitudes to nutrition, hygiene, exercise, and routine.
Aim 3 Children will be creative and spiritual.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. express themselves creatively and experience the arts 2. express themselves through a variety of types of play 3. develop and nurture their sense of wonder and awe 4. become reflective and think flexibly 5. care for the environment 6. understand that others may have beliefs and values different to their own.
Aim 4 Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on life.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. show increasing independence, and be able to make choices and decisions 2. demonstrate a sense of mastery and belief in their own abilities and display learning dispositions, such as determination and perseverance 3. think positively, take learning risks, and become resilient and resourceful when things go wrong 4. motivate themselves, and welcome and seek challenge 5. respect life, their own and others, and know that life has a meaning and purpose 6. be active citizens.



Table 2: Aims and learning goals for *Identity and Belonging*

Identity and Belonging	
Aims	Learning goals
Aim 1 Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. build respectful relationships with others 2. appreciate the features that make a person special and unique (name, size, hair, hand and footprint, gender, birthday) 3. understand that as individuals they are separate from others with their own needs, interests and abilities 4. have a sense of 'who they are' and be able to describe their backgrounds, strengths and abilities 5. feel valued and see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment 6. express their own ideas, preferences and needs, and have these responded to with respect and consistency.
Aim 2 Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. feel that they have a place and a right to belong to the group 2. know that members of their family and community are positively acknowledged and welcomed 3. be able to share personal experiences about their own families and cultures, and come to know that there is a diversity of family structures, cultures and backgrounds 4. understand and take part in routines, customs, festivals, and celebrations 5. see themselves as part of a wider community and know about their local area, including some of its places, features and people 6. understand the different roles of people in the community.
Aim 3 Children will be able to express their rights and show an understanding and regard for the identity, rights and views of others.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. express their views and help make decisions in matters that affect them 2. understand the rules and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour 3. interact, work co-operatively, and help others 4. be aware of and respect others' needs, rights, feelings, culture, language, background, and religious beliefs 5. have a sense of social justice and recognise and deal with unfair behaviour 6. demonstrate the skills of co-operation, responsibility, negotiation, and conflict resolution.
Aim 4 Children will see themselves as capable learners.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. develop a broad range of abilities and interests 2. show an awareness of their own unique strengths, abilities and learning styles, and be willing to share their skills and knowledge with others 3. show increasing confidence and self-assurance in directing their own learning 4. demonstrate dispositions like curiosity, persistence and responsibility 5. experience learning opportunities that are based on personal interests, and linked to their home, community and culture 6. be motivated, and begin to think about and recognise their own progress and achievements.

Table 3: Aims and learning goals for *Communicating*

Communicating	
Aims	Learning goals
Aim 1 Children will use non-verbal communication skills.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. use a range of body movements, facial expressions, and early vocalisations to show feelings and share information 2. understand and use non-verbal communication rules, such as turn-taking and making eye contact 3. interpret and respond to non-verbal communication by others 4. understand and respect that some people will rely on non-verbal communication as their main way of interacting with others 5. combine non-verbal and verbal communication to get their point across 6. express themselves creatively and imaginatively using non-verbal communication.
Aim 2 Children will use language.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. interact with other children and adults by listening, discussing and taking turns in conversation 2. explore sound, pattern, rhythm, and repetition in language 3. use an expanding vocabulary of words and phrases, and show a growing understanding of syntax and meaning 4. use language with confidence and competence for giving and receiving information, asking questions, requesting, refusing, negotiating, problem-solving, imagining and recreating roles and situations, and clarifying thinking, ideas and feelings 5. become proficient users of at least one language and have an awareness and appreciation of other languages 6. be positive about their home language, and know that they can use different languages to communicate with different people and in different situations.
Aim 3 Children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. use language to interpret experiences, to solve problems, and to clarify thinking, ideas and feelings 2. use books and ICT for fun, to gain information and broaden their understanding of the world 3. build awareness of the variety of symbols (pictures, print, numbers) used to communicate, and understand that these can be read by others 4. become familiar with and use a variety of print in an enjoyable and meaningful way 5. have opportunities to use a variety of mark-making materials and implements in an enjoyable and meaningful way 6. develop counting skills, and a growing understanding of the meaning and use of numbers and mathematical language in an enjoyable and meaningful way.
Aim 4 Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving, and responding to these experiences 2. express themselves through the visual arts using skills such as cutting, drawing, gluing, sticking, painting, building, printing, sculpting, and sewing 3. listen to and respond to a variety of types of music, sing songs and make music using instruments 4. use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences 5. respond to and create literacy experiences through story, poetry, song, and drama 6. show confidence in trying out new things, taking risks, and thinking creatively.



Table 4: Aims and learning goals for *Exploring and Thinking*

Exploring and Thinking	
Aims	Learning goals
Aim 1 Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> engage, explore and experiment in their environment and use new physical skills including skills to manipulate objects and materials demonstrate a growing understanding of themselves and others in their community develop an understanding of change as part of their lives learn about the natural environment and its features, materials, animals, and plants, and their own responsibility as carers develop a sense of time, shape, space, and place come to understand concepts such as matching, comparing, ordering, sorting, size, weight, height, length, capacity, and money in an enjoyable and meaningful way.
Aim 2 Children will develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning, investigating, understanding, negotiating, and problem-solving, and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> recognise patterns and make connections and associations between new learning and what they already know gather and use information from different sources using their increasing cognitive, physical and social skills use their experience and information to explore and develop working theories about how the world works, and think about how and why they learn things demonstrate their ability to reason, negotiate and think logically collaborate with others to share interests and to solve problems confidently use their creativity and imagination to think of new ways to solve problems.
Aim 3 Children will explore ways to represent ideas, feelings, thoughts, objects, and actions through symbols.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> make marks and use drawing, painting and model-making to record objects, events and ideas become familiar with and associate symbols (pictures, numbers, letters, and words) with the things they represent build awareness of the variety of symbols (pictures, print, numbers) used to communicate, and use these in an enjoyable and meaningful way leading to early reading and writing express feelings, thoughts and ideas through improvising, moving, playing, talking, writing, story-telling, music and art use letters, words, sentences, numbers, signs, pictures, colour, and shapes to give and record information, to describe and to make sense of their own and others' experiences use books and ICT (software and the internet) for enjoyment and as a source of information.
Aim 4 Children will have positive attitudes towards learning and develop dispositions like curiosity, playfulness, perseverance, confidence, resourcefulness, and risk-taking.	In partnership with the adult, children will <ol style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrate growing confidence in being able to do things for themselves address challenges and cope with frustrations make decisions and take increasing responsibility for their own learning feel confident that their ideas, thoughts and questions will be listened to and taken seriously develop higher-order thinking skills such as problem-solving, predicting, analysing, questioning, and justifying act on their curiosity, take risks and be open to new ideas and uncertainty.

APPENDIX 14

TIMETABLE OF TRAINING SESSION SCHEDULE

October 2015 Week 1

Time	Thursday 1st	Friday 2 nd	Monday 5 th	Tuesday 6 th	Wednesday 7th
2.00-3.30	Pre Focus Group Session 1				
9.30-10.30			Observation 1/R1		
11.00-12.00			Observation 1/R2		
9.30-10.30				Observation 1/R3	
11.00-12.00				Observation 1/R4	

October 2015 Week 2

Time	Thursday 8th	Friday 9th	Monday 12th	Tuesday 13th	Wednesday 14th
2.00-3.30	Session 2				
9.30-10.30			Observation 2/R1		
11.00-12.00			Observation 2/R2		
9.30-10.30				Observation 2/R3	
11.00-12.00				Observation 2/R4	

October 2015 Week 3

Time	Thursday 15th	Friday 16th	Monday 19th	Tuesday 20th	Wednesday 21st
2.00-3.30	Session 3				
9.30-10.30			Observation 3/R1		
11.00-12.00			Observation 3/R2		
9.30-10.30				Observation 3/R3	
11.00-12.00				Observation 3/R4	

November 2015 Week 4

Time	Thursday 05th	Friday 06th	Monday 09th	Tuesday 10th	Wednesday 11th
2.00-3.30	Session 4				
9.30-10.30			Observation 4/R1		
11.00-12.00			Observation 4/R2		
9.30-10.30				Observation 4/R3	
11.00-12.00				Observation 4/R4	

November 2015 Week 5

Time	Thursday 12th	Friday 13th	Monday 16th	Tuesday 17th	Wednesday 18th
2.00-3.30	Session 5				
9.30-10.30			Observation 5/R1		
11.00-12.00			Observation 5/R2		
9.30-10.30				Observation 5/R3	
11.00-12.00				Observation 5/R4	

November 2015 Week 6

Time	Thursday 19th	Friday 20th	Monday 23th	Tuesday 24th	Wednesday 25th
2.00-3.30	Session 6				
9.30-10.30			Observation 6/R1		
11.00-12.00			Observation 6/R2		
9.30-10.30				Observation 6/R3	
11.00-12.00				Observation 6/R4	

November/December 2015 Week 7

Time	Thursday 26th	Friday 13th	Monday 30th	Tuesday 01st	Wednesday 02nd
2.00-3.30	Session 1-6				
9.30-10.30			Observation 1-6/R1		
11.00-12.00			Observation 1-6/R2		
9.30-10.30				Observation 1-6/R3	
11.00-12.00				Observation 1-6/R4	Post Focus Group

Appendix 15

THEMED ORGANIC LESSON PLAN BY RESEARCHER/TEACHERS



Area 1: Socio-Dramatic Area

Activity/Week 1: Farmers' market
Activity/Week 2: Interview a farmer
Activity/Week 3: Super market
Activity/Week 4: On the farm

Area 5: Art Area

Activity/Week 1: Make farm collages out of natural materials
Activity/Week 2: Farm fruit and vegetable printmaking
Activity/Week 3: Use playdough to create animals
Activity/Week 4: Make a pink pig, make a brown cow

THEME THE FARM

Area 2: Maths Area

Activity/Week 1: Sorting farm animals
Activity/Week 2: Matching farm animals
Activity/Week 3: Ordering farm animals
Activity/Week 4: Sequencing farm animals

Area 4: Construction Area

Activity/Week 1: Construct farmyards from lego, wooden blocks and mega blocks
Activity/Day 2: Construct farmyard maps for the three little pigs to navigate
Activity/Week 3: Use playdough to create a farm scene
Activity/Week 4: Small world play with farm animals and machinery

Area 3: Literacy Area

Activity/Week 1: Match picture to word
Activity/Week 2: Eye spy to practice initial sound collections
Activity/Week 3: Look at non-fiction books about farms
Activity/Week 4: Sequence the story of the three little pigs

Appendix 16

RESEARCHER/TEACHER THEMED LESSON PLANS

APPENDIX 17

AREA 3/ACTIVITY 1: LITERACY AREA – THE FARM RESEARCHER/TEACHER LESSON PLAN GUIDELINES

Theme Farm:

Area 3 Literacy

Key Learning Aims		Resources to include
<p>Communicating Aim - 1 Children will use non verbal communication skills. Learning goals: Use a range of body movements, facial expressions, and early vocalisations to show feelings and share information. Understand and use non-verbal communication rules, such as turn-taking and making eye contact. Interpret and respond to non-verbal communication by others. Understand and respect that some people will rely on non-verbal communication as their main way of interacting with others. Combine non-verbal and verbal communication to get their point across. Express themselves creatively and imaginatively using non-verbal communication.</p>	<p>Well-Being Aim - Children will be strong psychologically and socially. Learning goals: Make strong attachments and develop warm and supportive relationships with family, peers and adults in out-of-home settings and in their community. Be aware of and name their own feelings, and understand that others may have different feelings. Handle transitions and changes well. Be confident and self-reliant. Respect themselves, others and the environment. Make decisions and choices about their own learning and development.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Range of fiction and non-fiction books covering a wide range of subjects • Banded books for free readers • Books relevant to class topics • Story tapes with headphones • Puppets/puppet theatre • Dressing up clothes • Story sacks/props
<p>Exploring and Thinking Aim - 1 Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them. Learning goals: Engage, explore and experiment in their environment and use new physical skills including skills to manipulate objects and materials. Demonstrate a growing understanding of themselves and others in their community. Develop an understanding of change as part of their lives. Learn about the natural environment and its features, materials, animals, and plants, and their own responsibility as carers. Develop a sense of time, shape, space, and place. Come to understand concepts such as matching, comparing, ordering, sorting, size, weight, height, length, capacity, and memory in an enjoyable and meaningful way.</p>	<p>Identity and Belonging Aim 1 - Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories. Learning goals: Build respectful relationships with others Appreciate the features that make a person special and unique (name, size, hair, hand and footprint, gender, birthday). Understand that as individuals they fare separate from others with their own needs, interests and abilities. Have a sense of 'who they are' and be able to describe their backgrounds, strengths and abilities. Feel valued and see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment. Express their own ideas, preferences and needs, and have these responded to with respect and consistency.</p>	<p>Vocabulary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Book terms eg. front/back cover, title, author, blurb, illustrator, pictures, print, letters, sentence, page, story, non-fiction, fiction, setting, characters, read

Researcher: Play Topic: The Farm		Timeframe: 1week
Literacy Area Week 1: Match picture to word		
Curriculum Integration: SESE, Irish, English, SPHE, Music, Visual Art, Physical Education		
Visit Take a trip to a local farm.		
Visitors Parents or Grandparents can come in to visit classroom and talk about farming.		
Resources: All resources are liquid, i.e. they can move or flow from area to area and can be used in all themes at all times in all areas. There is no set list for resources, the following are guidelines. Multiples of coloured and different sized farm animals consisting of wooden and plastic farm animals. Animal cards for sorting.		Assessment
Guidelines: Matching animal pictures: Have children cut out the animal cards of mother and babies. Place each card in the appropriate "mother" or "baby" group. Help the baby animals find their mammy. Help the children build their vocabulary by reading and discussing words together as they find each match eg. Cow, calf. Extend the learning by matching animals that have two legs, four legs, match animals that are small/big etc. Through discussion introduce words in relation to the farm, milk cows, plant seeds, water the crops, plough the fields, brush the animals, sheer the sheep, collect eggs from hens, cut the wheat, feed the animals. Music and Movement: Songs: Mary had a little lamb, how much is that doggie in the window, Baa, baa black sheep and many more. Language: Story books: 5 Little ducks went out to play, discuss pictures of farm animals, how to care for animals, have you any pets at home. Gross Motor Activities: Gallop like a horse, waddle like a duck, bunny hop. (these activities can be done indoors or outdoors).		

APPENDIX 18

AREA1/ACTIVITY 1: SOCIO-DRAMA AREA – FARMERS MARKET – AMY’S LESSON PLAN

Theme: Farm

Area 1 Socio-Dramatic

Key Learning Aims		Resources to include
<p>Communicating Aim - 1 Children will use non verbal communication skills. Learning goals: Use a range of body movements, facial expressions, and early vocalisations to show feelings and share information. Understand and use non-verbal communication rules, such as turn-taking and making eye contact. Interpret and respond to non-verbal communication by others. Understand and respect that some people will rely on non-verbal communication as their main way of interacting with others. Combine non-verbal and verbal communication to get their point across. Express themselves creatively and imaginatively using non-verbal communication.</p>	<p>Well-Being Aim - 1 Children will be strong psychologically and socially. Learning goals: Make strong attachments and develop warm and supportive relationships with family, peers and adults in out-of-home settings and in their community. Be aware of and name their own feelings, and understand that others may have different feelings. Handle transitions and changes well. Be confident and self-reliant. Respect themselves, others and the environment. Make decisions and choices about their own learning and development.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of writing materials eg. notebooks, labels, receipt books, pencils, clipboards and paper, telephone message books Everyday technology as appropriate to the role-play scenario, eg. telephones, cash register, camera, computer Animal Puppets, stuffed animals, animal masks, puppet theatre Dressing up clothes, animal costumes, farm work clothes, wellingtons, hats, gloves.
<p>Exploring and Thinking Aim - 1 Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them. Learning goals: Engage, explore and experiment in their environment and use new physical skills including skills to manipulate objects and materials. Demonstrate a growing understanding of themselves and others in their community. Develop an understanding of change as part of their lives. Learn about the natural environment and its features, materials, animals, and plants, and their own responsibility as carers. Develop a sense of time, shape, space, and place. Come to understand concepts such as matching, comparing, ordering, sorting, size, weight, height, length, capacity, and memory in an enjoyable and meaningful way.</p>	<p>Identity and Belonging Aim 1 - Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories. Learning goals: Build respectful relationships with others Appreciate the features that make a person special and unique (name, size, hair, hand and footprint, gender, birthday). Understand that as individuals they fare separate from others with their own needs, interests and abilities. Have a sense of 'who they are' and be able to describe their backgrounds, strengths and abilities. Feel valued and see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment. Express their own ideas, preferences and needs, and have these responded to with respect and consistency.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Vocabulary</p> <p>Vocabulary to be displayed which is relevant to the role-play scenario The Farm: farm, farmer, stable, house, barn, sheep, cow, pig, hen, horse, milk, cheese, butter, hay, grass, tillage, silage, field, tractor, car, country, crops, wheat, barley and baby animal names.</p>

Amy: Play Topic: The Farm		Timeframe: 1week
Socio-Dramatic Area: Activity/Week 1: Farmers' market		
Curriculum Integration: SESE, Irish, Maths, English, SPHE, Music, Visual Art, Physical Education Visit Take a trip to a farm.		
Visitors Parents or Grandparents can come in to visit classroom and talk about farming.		
Resources: All resources are liquid, i.e. they can move or flow from area to area and can be used in all themes at all times in all areas. There is no set list for resources, the following are guidelines. Dressing up clothes, animal costumes, farm work clothes, wellingtons, hats, gloves, shopping baskets, wooden fruits and vegetables, a cash register and pretend money (notes and coins), shopping bags, paper, pencils, etc.		Observation comments The boys really enjoyed this activity, a visit to the farmers market. They dressed up as farmers, customers, and sellers. Buying and selling of different items, asking how much, how many for etc. Using props to make the situation 'real' – exchanging money for items. Good communication skills and collaboration between children.
Guidelines: Farmers' Market - Set up an imaginary farmers' market with the above resources. Encourage children's communication skill and social skills through role-play and drama.		

APPENDIX 19

AREA2/ACTIVITY 1: MATHS AREA – SORTING FARM ANIMALS – ELLA’S LESSON PLAN

Theme: Farm

Area 2 Maths

Key Learning Aims		Resources to include
<p>Communicating Aim - 1 Children will use non verbal communication skills. Learning goals: Use a range of body movements, facial expressions, and early vocalisations to show feelings and share information. Understand and use non-verbal communication rules, such as turn-taking and making eye contact. Interpret and respond to non-verbal communication by others. Understand and respect that some people will rely on non-verbal communication as their main way of interacting with others. Combine non-verbal and verbal communication to get their point across. Express themselves creatively and imaginatively using non-verbal communication.</p>	<p>Well-Being Aim - Children will be strong psychologically and socially. Learning goals: Make strong attachments and develop warm and supportive relationships with family, peers and adults in out-of-home settings and in their community. Be aware of and name their own feelings, and understand that others may have different feelings. Handle transitions and changes well. Be confident and self-reliant. Respect themselves, others and the environment. Make decisions and choices about their own learning and development.</p>	<p>A variety of mark making equipment including chalk, paint, wax crayons, charcoal, pencils, sponges, rollers, colouring pens Templates/stencils Different coloured paper/card A variety of different materials including bubble wrap/fabric/foam/card/paper/foil Scissors Glue Sequins/buttons/stickers</p>
<p>Exploring and Thinking Aim - 1 Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them. Learning goals: Engage, explore and experiment in their environment and use new physical skills including skills to manipulate objects and materials. Demonstrate a growing understanding of themselves and others in their community. Develop an understanding of change as part of their lives. Learn about the natural environment and its features, materials, animals, and plants, and their own responsibility as carers. Develop a sense of time, shape, space, and place. Come to understand concepts such as matching, comparing, ordering, sorting, size, weight, height, length, capacity, and memory in an enjoyable and meaningful way.</p>	<p>Identity and Belonging Aim 1 - Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories. Learning goals: Build respectful relationships with others Appreciate the features that make a person special and unique (name, size, hair, hand and footprint, gender, birthday). Understand that as individuals they fare separate from others with their own needs, interests and abilities. Have a sense of 'who they are' and be able to describe their backgrounds, strengths and abilities. Feel valued and see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment. Express their own ideas, preferences and needs, and have these responded to with respect and consistency.</p>	<p>Vocabulary Names of colours Names of art/DT equipment and techniques as appropriate eg. Collage, mosaic, papier, mache, sponge painting, paintbrush, paint, chalks, pastels, wax, crayons, stencil, pencils, charcoal, glue, ink, scissors.</p>

Ella: Play Topic: The Farm	Timeframe: 1week
Maths Area Week 1: Sorting farm animals	
Curriculum Integration: SESE, Irish, English, SPHE, Music, Visual Art, Physical Education Visit Take a trip to a local farm.	
Visitors Parents or Grandparents can come in to visit classroom and talk about farming.	
Resources: All resources are liquid, i.e. they can move or flow from area to area and can be used in all themes at all times in all areas. There is no set list for resources, the following are guidelines. Multiples of coloured and different sized farm animals are required for maths. These consist of wooden and plastic farm animals.	Observation comments This activity went well. Children enjoyed sorting the animals, limiting the activity to two animals made the task easy for the children, when asked to sort animals that have two legs/four legs took an amount of concentration. Good communication skills between children was evident. The activity was accompanied by children making sounds linked to the animal, eg. Sheep – baa, baa.
Guidelines: Sorting: Sort farm animals eg. pigs/not pigs, sheep/not sheep, limit to two animals to start with and then increase number of animals to sort to three and then four. Develop by sorting animals that have four legs/two legs; animals that go into water/do not go into water; have feathers/do not have feathers/ etc.	

APPENDIX 20

AREA4/ACTIVITY 1: CONSTRUCTION AREA – CONSTRUCT FARMYARDS FROM LEGO, WOODEN BLOCKS AND MEGA BLOCKS – DAWN’S LESSON PLAN

Theme Farm

Area 4 Construction

Key Learning Aims		Resources to include
<p>Communicating Aim – 1 Children will use non verbal communication skills. Learning goals: Use a range of body movements, facial expressions, and early vocalisations to show feelings and share information. Understand and use non-verbal communication rules, such as turn-taking and making eye contact. Interpret and respond to non-verbal communication by others. Understand and respect that some people will rely on non-verbal communication as their main way of interacting with others. Combine non-verbal and verbal communication to get their point across. Express themselves creatively and imaginatively using non-verbal communication.</p>	<p>Well-Being Aim – Children will be strong psychologically and socially. Learning goals: Make strong attachments and develop warm and supportive relationships with family, peers and adults in out-of-home settings and in their community. Be aware of and name their own feelings, and understand that others may have different feelings. Handle transitions and changes well. Be confident and self-reliant. Respect themselves, others and the environment. Make decisions and choices about their own learning and development.</p>	<p>Range of fiction and non-fiction Lego, Duplo, Mobilo Sticklebricks, Interstar Wooden building blocks Cars/road mats/other transport Train track Animals/farm/zoo Dolls house Small world people Pictures of models as stimulus Clipboards/pens/paper for planning/recording</p>
<p>Exploring and Thinking Aim – 1 Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them. Learning goals: Engage, explore and experiment in their environment and use new physical skills including skills to manipulate objects and materials. Demonstrate a growing understanding of themselves and others in their community. Develop an understanding of change as part of their lives. Learn about the natural environment and its features, materials, animals, and plants, and their own responsibility as carers. Develop a sense of time, shape, space, and place. Come to understand concepts such as matching, comparing, ordering, sorting, size, weight, height, length, capacity, and memory in an enjoyable and meaningful way.</p>	<p>Identity and Belonging Aim 1 – Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories. Learning goals: Build respectful relationships with others Appreciate the features that make a person special and unique (name, size, hair, hand and footprint, gender, birthday). Understand that as individuals they fare separate from others with their own needs, interests and abilities. Have a sense of 'who they are' and be able to describe their backgrounds, strengths and abilities. Feel valued and see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment. Express their own ideas, preferences and needs, and have these responded to with respect and consistency.</p>	<p>Vocabulary Build/building/design/make/ join/ construct Tall/short/long/wide/deep Slide/roll/turn/push/pull Vehicle names Drive/travel/steer/move/fix/ fly Fast/slow/high/low/forwards/back wards Names of 2D and 3D shapes City/zoo/farm/land/island/ world/place/countryside</p>

Dawn: Play Topic: The Farm		Timeframe: 1week
Construction Area: Activity/Week 1: Construct farmyards from lego, wooden blocks and mega blocks		
Curriculum Integration: SESE, Irish, Maths, English, SPHE, Music, Visual Art, Physical Education Visit Take a trip to a local farm.		
Visitors Parents or Grandparents can come in to visit classroom and talk farming		
Resources: All resources are liquid, i.e. they can move or flow from area to area and can be used in all themes at all times in all areas. There is no set list for resources, the following are guidelines. Blocks, bristle, lego, nesting, stacking, building etc. Pegs and pegboards, counters, wheel and child-directed items (beads, laces, snap-together materials, etc.) Coloured play-dough. Large sheet of white paper and different coloured markers, pencils, crayons, colouring pencils, gel pens etc.		Observation comments The girls were very busy at the construction area today. The detail that went into creating a farm from blocks was wonderful. Grace worked independently while the other children worked as a group. They began by drawing a farm and then they created this from wooden blocks, play-dough, wheels etc.
Guidelines: Use table blocks of different colours and sizes to build a farm. Also construct houses, trees, sheds, fields, stables, machinery and people out of different types of blocks.		

APPENDIX 21

AREA5/ACTIVITY 1: ART AREA – MAKE FARM COLLAGES OUT OF NATURAL MATERIALS – CIARA’S LESSON PLAN

Theme: The Farm

Area 5 Art

Key Learning Aims		Resources to include
<p>Communicating Aim - 4 Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively. Learning goals: Share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving and responding to these experiences. Express themselves through the visual arts using skills such as cutting, drawing, gluing, sticking, painting, building, printing, sculpting, and sewing. Listen to and respond to a variety of types of music, sing songs and make music using instruments. Use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences. Respond to and create literacy experiences through story, poetry, song, and drama. Show confidence in trying out new things, taking risks, and thinking creatively.</p>	<p>Well-Being Aim - 4 Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on life. Learning goals: Show increasing independence, and be able to make choices and decisions. Demonstrate a sense of mastery and belief in their own abilities and display learning dispositions, such as determination and perseverance. Think positively, take learning risks, and become resilient and resourceful when things go wrong. Motivate themselves, and welcome and seek challenge. Respect life, their own and others, and know that life has a meaning and purpose. Be active citizens.</p>	<p>Variety of writing instruments including pencils, crayons, felt tips • Paper in a variety of sizes / colours White board and markers Tracing/pencil Paint brushes Scissors • Glue • Tape • Sponges • Variety of paint • Construction paper Kitchen paper</p>
<p>Exploring and Thinking Aim - 4 Children will have positive attitudes towards learning and develop dispositions like curiosity, playfulness, perseverance, confidence, resourcefulness, and risk-taking. Learning goals: Demonstrate growing confidence in being able to do things for themselves. Address challenges and cope with frustrations. Make decisions and take increasing responsibility for their own learning. Feel confident that their ideas, thoughts and questions will be listened to and taken seriously. Develop higher-order thinking skills such as problem-solving, predicting, analysing, questioning, and justifying. Act on their curiosity, take risks and be open to new ideas and uncertainty.</p>	<p>Identity and Belonging Aim 4 - Children will see themselves as capable learners. Learning goals: Develop a broad range of abilities and interests. Show an awareness of their own unique strengths, abilities and learning styles, and be willing to share their skills and knowledge with others. Show increasing confidence and self-assurance in directing their own learning. Demonstrate dispositions like curiosity, persistence and responsibility. Experience learning opportunities that are based on personal interests, and linked to their home, community and culture. Be motivated, and begin to think about and recognise their own progress and achievements.</p>	<p>Vocabulary Colour, print, design, draw, collage, variety, imagination, materials, creative, mix.</p>

Ciara: Play Topic: The Farm		Timeframe: 1week	
Art Area: Activity/Week 1: Make farm collages out of natural materials			
Curriculum Integration: SESE, Irish, Maths, English, SPHE, Music, Visual Art, Physical Education			
Visit Take a trip to a local farm.			
Visitors Parents or Grandparents can come in to visit classroom and talk about farming.			
Resources:		Observation comments	
All resources are liquid, i.e. they can move or flow from area to area and can be used in all themes at all times in all areas. There is no set list for resources, the following are guidelines. Collage materials collected on farms. Paint, printing tools such as sponges and card. Playdough, stiff paper or card, glue and tape. Scissors and pencils.		Children brought in materials from farms to create a farm collage. These included; feathers, straw, grass and wire. They were very busy making collages.	
Guidelines:			
<u>Creativity and Imagination</u>			
The art area provides opportunities for children to develop in the following developmental domains: emotional, social, motor, language and cognitive, decision making, visual learning, inventiveness and cultural awareness. Design a collage out of natural materials collected on a farm.			

APPENDIX 22

AREA 1/ACTIVITY 4: SOCIO-DRAMATIC AREA – ON THE FARM – AMY’S LESSON PLAN

Theme: The Farm

Area 1 Socio-Dramatic

Key Learning Aims		Resources to include
<p>Communicating Aim - 4 Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively. Learning goals: Share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving and responding to these experiences. Express themselves through the visual arts using skills such as cutting, drawing, gluing, sticking, painting, building, printing, sculpting, and sewing. Listen to and respond to a variety of types of music, sing songs and make music using instruments. Use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences. Respond to and create literacy experiences through story, poetry, song, and drama. Show confidence in trying out new things, taking risks, and thinking creatively.</p>	<p>Well-Being Aim - 4 Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on life. Learning goals: Show increasing independence, and be able to make choices and decisions. Demonstrate a sense of mastery and belief in their own abilities and display learning dispositions, such as determination and perseverance. Think positively, take learning risks, and become resilient and resourceful when things go wrong. Motivate themselves, and welcome and seek challenge. Respect life, their own and others, and know that life has a meaning and purpose. Be active citizens.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of writing materials eg. notebooks, labels, receipt books, pencils, clipboards and paper, telephone message books Everyday technology as appropriate to the role-play scenario, eg. telephones, cash register, camera, computer Animal Puppets, stuffed animals, animal masks, puppet theatre Dressing up clothes, animal costumes, farm work clothes, wellingtons, hats, gloves.
<p>Exploring and Thinking Aim - 4 Children will have positive attitudes towards learning and develop dispositions like curiosity, playfulness, perseverance, confidence, resourcefulness, and risk-taking. Learning goals: Demonstrate growing confidence in being able to do things for themselves. Address challenges and cope with frustrations. Make decisions and take increasing responsibility for their own learning. Feel confident that their ideas, thoughts and questions will be listened to and taken seriously. Develop higher-order thinking skills such as problem-solving, predicting, analysing, questioning, and justifying. Act on their curiosity, take risks and be open to new ideas and uncertainty.</p>	<p>Identity and Belonging Aim 4 - Children will see themselves as capable learners. Learning goals: Develop a broad range of abilities and interests. Show an awareness of their own unique strengths, abilities and learning styles, and be willing to share their skills and knowledge with others. Show increasing confidence and self-assurance in directing their own learning. Demonstrate dispositions like curiosity, persistence and responsibility. Experience learning opportunities that are based on personal interests, and linked to their home, community and culture. Be motivated, and begin to think about and recognise their own progress and achievements.</p>	<p>Vocabulary</p> <p>Vocabulary to be displayed which is relevant to the role-play scenario 'The Farm': farm, farmer, stable, house, barn, sheep, cow, pig, hen, horse, milk, cheese, butter, hay, grass, tillage, silage, field, tractor, car, country, crops, wheat, barley and baby animal names.</p>

Amy: Play Topic: The Farm	Timeframe: 1week
Socio-Dramatic Area: Activity/Week 4: On the farm	
Curriculum Integration: SESE, Irish, Maths, English, SPHE, Music, Visual Art, Physical Education Visit Take a trip to a local farm.	
Visitors Parents or Grandparents can come in to visit classroom and talk about farming.	
<p>Resources: All resources are liquid, i.e. they can move or flow from area to area and can be used in all themes at all times in all areas. There is no set list for resources, the following are guidelines. Dressing up clothes, animal costumes, farm work clothes, wellingtons, hats, gloves.</p>	<p>Observation comments</p> <p>Wonderful day at the farm – so much happening. Through collaboration children decided what characters they were going to take on. There was the farmer, the farmers’ wife, the farmers son, a dog and a vet. The role-play began by the farmer explaining what was going to happen on the farm. The farmer was waiting for the vet to call because he had a lame cow. The vet came, examined the cow, gave an injection and said he would call back tomorrow. The farmers’ wife made tea with hot buns and brought the tray outside where they ate sitting on the hay. The farmers’ son asked the vet to look at his dog because he looked sick. Rich language was clear throughout this role-play. Children were confident in their roles. To extend this learning a lesson theme on a visit to the vet would be beneficial for the children, learning how to care for animals. The boxes with the sheets over them took up too much room, not really needed.</p>
<p>Guidelines: Get an assortment of boxes and cover with yellow plastic or sheets to represent bailed hay. Children can role-play a day on a working farm. Farm animal masks can be used for some children to act the part of farm animals.</p>	

APPENDIX 23

AREA 2/ACTIVITY 4: MATHS AREA – SEQUENCING FARM ANIMALS – ELLA’S LESSON PLAN

Theme: The Farm

Area 2 Maths

Key Learning Aims		Resources to include
<p>Communicating Aim - 4 Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively. Learning goals: Share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving and responding to these experiences. Express themselves through the visual arts using skills such as cutting, drawing, gluing, sticking, painting, building, printing, sculpting, and sewing. Listen to and respond to a variety of types of music, sing songs and make music using instruments. Use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences. Respond to and create literacy experiences through story, poetry, song, and drama. Show confidence in trying out new things, taking risks, and thinking creatively.</p>	<p>Well-Being Aim - 4 Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on life. Learning goals: Show increasing independence, and be able to make choices and decisions. Demonstrate a sense of mastery and belief in their own abilities and display learning dispositions, such as determination and perseverance. Think positively, take learning risks, and become resilient and resourceful when things go wrong. Motivate themselves, and welcome and seek challenge. Respect life, their own and others, and know that life has a meaning and purpose. Be active citizens.</p>	<p>Counting Picture Books Wood Puzzles Sorting cups (graduated sizes) Stacking Toys Plastic Measuring Cups and Spoons Wooden and plastic farm animals</p>
<p>Exploring and Thinking Aim - 4 Children will have positive attitudes towards learning and develop dispositions like curiosity, playfulness, perseverance, confidence, resourcefulness, and risk-taking. Learning goals: Demonstrate growing confidence in being able to do things for themselves. Address challenges and cope with frustrations. Make decisions and take increasing responsibility for their own learning. Feel confident that their ideas, thoughts and questions will be listened to and taken seriously. Develop higher-order thinking skills such as problem-solving, predicting, analysing, questioning, and justifying. Act on their curiosity, take risks and be open to new ideas and uncertainty.</p>	<p>Identity and Belonging Aim 4 - Children will see themselves as capable learners. Learning goals: Develop a broad range of abilities and interests. Show an awareness of their own unique strengths, abilities and learning styles, and be willing to share their skills and knowledge with others. Show increasing confidence and self-assurance in directing their own learning. Demonstrate dispositions like curiosity, persistence and responsibility. Experience learning opportunities that are based on personal interests, and linked to their home, community and culture. Be motivated, and begin to think about and recognise their own progress and achievements.</p>	<p>Vocabulary Sorting, sequencing, capacity, biggest, tallest, smallest, more, less, before, after, equal, before, after, quantity, addition, subtraction, colour, size, shape, patterns.</p>

Ella: Play Topic: The Farm		Timeframe: 1week
Maths Area Week 4: Sequencing farm animals		
Curriculum Integration: SESE, Irish, English, SPHE, Music, Visual Art, Physical Education		
Visit Take a trip to a local farm.		
Visitors Parents or Grandparents can come in to visit classroom and talk about farming		
Resources: All resources are liquid, i.e. they can move or flow from area to area and can be used in all themes at all times in all areas. There is no set list for resources, the following are guidelines. Multiples of coloured and different sized farm animals are required for this activity. These consist of wooden and plastic farm animals.		Observation comments This was a fun activity, children followed the sequence cards that were provided. With the farm animals they had to sequence what was on the card – cow-horse-cow-horse, dog-cat-dog-cat. The children found this quite easy to do. This learning was extended by adding another two animals to the sequence – dog-cat-mouse-cat-cow. There was good team work when doing this activity. When they were asked to create their own sequence lots of concentration was involved, they really got involved in this activity. Some of the sequencing involved small animals – dog-cat-mouse-hen, hen-mouse-cat-dog. One child began to sequence farm machinery – tractor-car-trailer. Good activity for learning about sequencing, order, size, amount. Children really enjoyed it.
Guidelines: Sequencing: Sequencing by twos – cows/horse/cows/horse, - children have to copy that line formation of animals. Extend the pattern by threes – cows/horse/pigs/cows/horse/pigs, - children have to copy that line formation of animals. Further extending the sequencing process, encourage children to create their own sequencing pattern by number of legs, by colour, by size, etc.		

APPENDIX 24

AREA 4/ACTIVITY 4: CONSTRUCTION AREA – SMALL WORLD PLAY WITH ANIMALS AND MACHINERY – DAWN’S LESSON PLAN

Theme: The Farm

Area 4 Construction

Key Learning Aims		Resources to include
<p>Communicating Aim - 4 Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively. Learning goals: Share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving and responding to these experiences. Express themselves through the visual arts using skills such as cutting, drawing, gluing, sticking, painting, building, printing, sculpting, and sewing. Listen to and respond to a variety of types of music, sing songs and make music using instruments. Use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences. Respond to and create literacy experiences through story, poetry, song, and drama. Show confidence in trying out new things, taking risks, and thinking creatively.</p>	<p>Well-Being Aim - 4 Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on life. Learning goals: Show increasing independence, and be able to make choices and decisions. Demonstrate a sense of mastery and belief in their own abilities and display learning dispositions, such as determination and perseverance. Think positively, take learning risks, and become resilient and resourceful when things go wrong. Motivate themselves, and welcome and seek challenge. Respect life, their own and others, and know that life has a meaning and purpose. Be active citizens.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Range of fiction and non-fiction books Lego, Sticklebricks, Mega blocks Wooden building blocks Cars/road mats/other transport Tractors Animals/farm/zoo Small world people Pictures of models as stimulus Clipboards/pens/paper for planning/recording
<p>Exploring and Thinking Aim - 4 Children will have positive attitudes towards learning and develop dispositions like curiosity, playfulness, perseverance, confidence, resourcefulness, and risk-taking. Learning goals: Demonstrate growing confidence in being able to do things for themselves. Address challenges and cope with frustrations. Make decisions and take increasing responsibility for their own learning. Feel confident that their ideas, thoughts and questions will be listened to and taken seriously. Develop higher-order thinking skills such as problem-solving, predicting, analysing, questioning, and justifying. Act on their curiosity, take risks and be open to new ideas and uncertainty.</p>	<p>Identity and Belonging Aim 4 - Children will see themselves as capable learners. Learning goals: Develop a broad range of abilities and interests. Show an awareness of their own unique strengths, abilities and learning styles, and be willing to share their skills and knowledge with others. Show increasing confidence and self-assurance in directing their own learning. Demonstrate dispositions like curiosity, persistence and responsibility. Experience learning opportunities that are based on personal interests, and linked to their home, community and culture. Be motivated, and begin to think about and recognise their own progress and achievements.</p>	<p>Vocabulary</p> <p>Build/building/design/make/join/construct Tall/short/long/wide/deep Slide/roll/turn/push/pull Vehicle names Drive/travel/steer/move/fix / fly Fast/slow/high/low/forward s/backwards Names of 2D and 3D shapes Farm Place/countryside</p>

Dawn: Play Topic: The Farm		Timeframe: 1week
Construction Area: Activity/Week 4: Small world play with animals and machinery		
Curriculum Integration: SESE, Irish, Maths, English, SPHE, Music, Visual Art, Physical Education Visit Take a trip to a local farm.		
Visitors Parents or Grandparents can come in to visit classroom and talk farming		
Resources: All resources are liquid, i.e. they can move or flow from area to area and can be used in all themes at all times in all areas. There is no set list for resources. Blocks, bristle, lego, nesting, stacking, building etc. Pegs and pegboards, counters, wheel and gear boards, miscellaneous, child-directed items (beads, laces, snap-together materials, etc.) Farm animals, people and work vehicles. Coloured play-dough. Large sheet of white paper and different coloured markers, pencils, crayons, colouring pencils, gel pens etc.		Observation comments Busy at work in the construction area. Farms were created from different resources; wooden blocks, lego, bristle blocks etc. Two of the girls- Alison and Aoife decided to make a shed for the dog because he was always barking and annoying everyone. They created a shed out of coloured wooden blocks, placed foam inside the shed for a bed, wrote a sign for the door shed 'Dog' and drew a picture of a field with flowers, cows and sheep in it. Then they placed the wooden shed on the picture so it looked like the shed was in the field. Lovely imagination from the girls. Teamwork, communication skills and logic thinking was seen.
Guidelines: Children to construct a farm yard from the above resources. Create a farm table, display on table interesting items from farms. Design and make a cosy house for a farm animal and discuss what it needs.		

APPENDIX 25

AREA 5 ACTIVITY 4: ART AREA – MAKE A PINK PIG, MAKE A BROWN COW – CIARA’S LESSON PLAN

Theme: Farm

Area 5 Art

Key Learning Aims		Resources to include
<p>Communicating</p> <p>Aim - 1 Children will use non verbal communication skills.</p> <p>Learning goals:</p> <p>Use a range of body movements, facial expressions, and early vocalisations to show feelings and share information.</p> <p>Understand and use non-verbal communication rules, such as turn-taking and making eye contact.</p> <p>Interpret and respond to non-verbal communication by others.</p> <p>Understand and respect that some people will rely on non-verbal communication as their main way of interacting with others.</p> <p>Combine non-verbal and verbal communication to get their point across.</p> <p>Express themselves creatively and imaginatively using non-verbal communication.</p>	<p>Well-Being</p> <p>Aim - Children will be strong psychologically and socially.</p> <p>Learning goals:</p> <p>Make strong attachments and develop warm and supportive relationships with family, peers and adults in out-of-home settings and in their community.</p> <p>Be aware of and name their own feelings, and understand that others may have different feelings.</p> <p>Handle transitions and changes well.</p> <p>Be confident and self-reliant.</p> <p>Respect themselves, others and the environment.</p> <p>Make decisions and choices about their own learning and development.</p>	<p>Variety of writing instruments including pencils, crayons, felt tips</p> <p>Paper in a variety of sizes / colours</p> <p>Envelopes, stamps</p> <p>Paper for lists, phone messages, notes etc</p> <p>Folded paper/card to make greetings cards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> White board and markers Tracing/pencil control sheets <p>Children's name cards</p> <p>Key words and phrases</p>
<p>Exploring and Thinking</p> <p>Aim - 1 Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them.</p> <p>Learning goals:</p> <p>Engage, explore and experiment in their environment and use new physical skills including skills to manipulate objects and materials.</p> <p>Demonstrate a growing understanding of themselves and others in their community.</p> <p>Develop an understanding of change as part of their lives.</p> <p>Learn about the natural environment and its features, materials, animals, and plants, and their own responsibility as carers.</p> <p>Develop a sense of time, shape, space, and place.</p> <p>Come to understand concepts such as matching, comparing, ordering, sorting, size, weight, height, length, capacity, and memory in an enjoyable and meaningful way.</p>	<p>Identity and Belonging</p> <p>Aim 1 - Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories.</p> <p>Learning goals:</p> <p>Build respectful relationships with others</p> <p>Appreciate the features that make a person special and unique (name, size, hair, hand and footprint, gender, birthday).</p> <p>Understand that as individuals they fare separate from others with their own needs, interests and abilities.</p> <p>Have a sense of 'who they are' and be able to describe their backgrounds, strengths and abilities.</p> <p>Feel valued and see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment.</p> <p>Express their own ideas, preferences and needs, and have these responded to with respect and consistency.</p>	<p>Vocabulary</p> <p>Letter names and sounds</p> <p>Letters, words</p> <p>Write</p> <p>Read</p> <p>Vocabulary related to equipment and materials</p>

Ciara: Play Topic: The Farm		Timeframe: 1week
Art Area Activity/Week 4: Make a pink pig, make a brown cow		
Curriculum Integration: SESE, Irish, Maths, English, SPHE, Music, Visual Art, Physical Education Visit Take a trip to a local farm.		
Visitors. Parents or Grandparents can come in to visit classroom and talk about farming.		
Resources: All resources are liquid, i.e. they can move or flow from area to area and can be used in all themes at all times in all areas. There is no set list for resources, the following are guidelines. Collage materials collected on farms. Paint, printing tools such as sponges and card. Playdough, stiff paper or card, glue and tape. Scissors and pencils.		Observation comments Today we made a pink pig and a brown cow. I showed the children when we mix red and white paint together we make the colour pink. They painted paper plates in pink and they then created their own pig face, some were happy pigs others were not. They same happened for the cow, again I showed the children how to make the colour brown by mixing red paint and green together. Again paper plates were painted in brown paint and the children created their own faces. Good activity for listening to instructions, following a process, waiting for paint to dry. Communication between children was flowing – What did you name your pig? Are you selling your cow at the mart? Collaboration between the group was evident as was sharing and turn-taking.
Guidelines: The art area provides opportunities for children to develop in the following developmental domains: emotional, social, motor, language and cognitive, decision making, visual learning, inventiveness and cultural awareness. Show children red and white paint, when mixed it turns pink. Let children make a pink pig. Show children red and green paint, when mixed it turns brown. Let children make a brown cow.		

APPENDIX 26

THEMES FOR PLAY

THEMES FOR PLAY

Places to visit
Airport
Baby Clinic
D.I.Y. Store
Dentist
Estate Agent
Garda Station
Hairdressing Salon
Hospital
Pet Shop
Shoe Shop
Sweet Shop
Travel Agents

AIRPORT

Resources

Bags, suitcases - luggage labels
 Currency desk, information desk, check-in desk
 Customs
 Desk
 Map of World
 Noticeboard
 Passports
 Posters
 Seats
 Telephones
 Tickets
 Toilets
 Trolleys
 Uniforms

Learning	
Linguistic & Literary	Reading instructions, notice boards, passenger lists, luggage labels, passports, answering phone, discussion.
Mathematical	Currency, seating plans, times, timetables, counting people.
Scientific	Weather.
Physical	Carrying, loading, pushing trolleys, packing suitcases.
Technological	Using computer software.
Aesthetic & Creative	Designing holiday brochures, meals for in-flight catering.
Music/Songs	The Wheels on the plane, I'm a little airplane and 5 little airplanes
Human: History/Geography	Other countries - destinations, languages.
Spiritual & Moral	Other cultures/religions. Declaring goods at customs, smuggling.
Social & Emotional Development	Sharing, co-operating.
Extension Activities	Visit to airport/travel agents.

BABY CLINIC

Resources

Baby baths
 Scales
 Changing mats
 Nappies
 Toys
 Desk
 Charts
 Posters
 Dolls
 Dolls clothes - basket for baby clothes
 Signs - directions: office, toilet, doctor etc
 White coats/uniforms
 Doctors equipment
 Empty pill bottles
 Empty baby milk tins
 Baby bottles
 Chairs
 Telephone
 Baby book - to record weight
 Prams

Learning	
Linguistic & Literary	Discussion of child development - feeding, sleeping, walking etc. Vocabulary - equipment. Signs and posters. Adverts for baby requirements. Family relationships. Reading instructions, leaflets. Writing in appointments.
Mathematical	Weighing, measuring. Graphs. Ages: Days, months, years. Comparison, big, little. Matching one to one. Colour - hair, eyes, clothes. Pairs - clothing. Matching items to right baby. Sorting into sets.
Scientific	Ourselves - Body development, development of skills. Human Needs - food, warmth, sleep, love. Safety in the home - "Hygiene". Washing and Cleaning. Healthy eating. Dental needs.
Physical	Dressing. Use of equipment to weight measure. Writing. Tidying up. Pushing pram.
Technological	Packaging. Toys. Design equipment/clothes.
Spiritual & Moral	Caring for others. Feelings. Jealousy.
Social & Emotional Development	Sharing. Co-operating. Turns taking. Looking after younger members of the group. Family life.
Home & School	Siblings. Personal experiences.
Extension Activities	Baby to visit the class - feeding, bathing. Visit to a clinic, school Nurse/Doctor.

D.I.Y Shop

Resources

Paint Pots
 Wallpaper books and rolls of wallpaper
 Paintbrushes
 Colour charts
 Paste, materials
 Rollers, tiles, carpets
 Screws, nails
 Hammers, screwdrivers
 Nuts and bolts
 Wood
 Door numbers
 Door bells
 Door knockers
 Door Handles
 Pictures
 Kettles
 Ladders
 Beds and Linen
 Furniture (indoor and outdoor)

Learning	
Linguistic & Literary	Signs, Poster, instructions on products. Shopping lists.
Mathematical	Pattern - wallpaper. Colour matching and sorting. Weighing, measuring. Estimating. Counting and number recognition. Money - using the registrar. Size. Sequencing
Scientific	Materials. Texture. Weathering. Waterproofing. Electricity. Safety in the home.
Physical	Use of tools - hammer, tape measure, brushes. Painting. Scraping. Loading. Carrying.
Technological	Designing furniture, wallpaper, room layouts to plan, design patterns.
Aesthetic & Creative	Designing carpets, wall paper, curtains, choosing fabrics, floor patterns etc.
Human: History/Geography	Houses in the past, how people lived. Room plans.
Social & Emotional Development	Sharing. Cooperation. Decision Making. Taking care of resources. Safety. Storage.
Extension Activities	Decorating the doll house/home corner.

DENTIST

Resources

Dentist's chair (Typist's chair)
 Small chairs - waiting room
 Large mirror
 Posters - keep teeth clean
 Leaflets - healthy teeth
 Magazines (waiting area)
 Overhead lamp
 "Dentist's tools"
 Mouth wash/sink/plastic cups/tissues
 Uniforms - dentist/assistants
 Toothbrushes, aprons - bibs
 Appointments book/cards
 Telephone/computer/calendar, diary, receipt book
 Cash box, money, forms to fill in, radio.

Learning	
Linguistic & Literary	Writing in appointments/cards/diary/planning. Form filling. Signs. Adverts. Oral - discussion, using phone, using the computer for letters.
Mathematical	Counting - teeth. Time and appointments. Money.
Scientific	Health education. Keeping teeth clean. Healthy diet.
Physical	Using tools correctly. Writing. Putting on the overalls.
Technological	
Aesthetic & Creative	
Music	
Human: History/Geography	
Spiritual & Moral	Feelings - fear.
Social & Emotional Development	Taking turns - sharing. Communication. Understanding roles.
Home & School	Own experiences of going to the dentist.
Extension Activities	Visit from oral hygienist. Visit to dentist's surgery. Health Education materials.

ESTATE AGENTS

Resources
Computer
Calendar
Telephone
Leaflets
Pockets
Pens/paper
Chair
Tables
Forms to fill in
Posters
Magazines
Mortgage leaflets
Typewriter

Learning	
Linguistic & Literary	Addresses. House details. Advertising boards. Filling in questionnaires. Form filling. Appointments in diary. Adverts in the paper. Typing. Answering the phone.
Mathematical	Prices of houses. Number of rooms. Size of rooms. Measurement. Estimating costs. Categorising types of houses. Number recognition. Odds and Evens. Graphs of types of houses.
Scientific	Building materials. Form and function. Strength, structure and rigidity. Weather proofing.
Physical	Making and doing. Moving house. Packing up the home corner into boxes and unloading/setting out again.
Technological	Designing homes and houses. Designing room layout, furniture and furnishings. Interpreting plans.
Aesthetic & Creative	Observational drawings of built environment. Printing. Colour mixing. Closing furnishings.
Music	
Human: History/Geography	Houses in the past. Houses in other countries. Maps and plans. Routes and communications.
Spiritual & Moral	Homelessness. Citizenship. Caring for others.
Social & Emotional Development	Cooperation. Negotiation
Home & School	Moving house.
Extension Activities	Visit from an estate agent

GARDA STATION

Resources

Enquiry counter - report book, telephone, leaflets, paper, pen and pencils
 Make wanted posters
 Computer, telephones
 Uniforms - hats, radio, handcuffs, fluorescent jackets, armband for directing traffic, traffic cones, any signs
 Visit to police station
 Toy Police car
 Cells - bed (wash-basin), keys
 Children make up story - puppets
 Develop safety themes - don't go with strangers, road safety
 Stories - Burglar Bill, Cops and Robbers

Learning	
Linguistic & Literary	Making verbal reports. Using tape recorder-listen to make reports, use telephone - 999 calls - messages etc. Captions for posters. Discuss the work guards generally do.
Mathematical	Counting/recording no. of 999 calls - Graph. How many staff, how many prisoners.
Scientific	Safety use of protective clothing. Light/dark - need to be seen - different fabrics which can be seen in the dark. First Aid.
Physical	Movement using percussion relating to incidents, people, vehicles.
Technological	Using radio/tape recorder/intercom. Recording interviews. Using computer to store information: No. in cells/no. of calls.
Aesthetic & Creative	Making large cars to sit in/ Design First Aid Kit. Make Traffic signs/cones. Draw criminal wanted posters.
Music	Traffic/Police Songs. Percussion - sounds – traffic.
Human: History/Geography	Origin of Guard Old/New uniforms, vehicles, communications. Map of area. Discuss local problems relating to traffic, shops, schools. Visit local area and guard station.
Spiritual & Moral	Moral Aspect of crime/safety generally. Use and care of animals/returning items found/caring and helping.
Social & Emotional Development	Working out real life situations. Co-operating with peers - planning and working together
Extension Activities	Puppet theatre for puppets. Dressing up clothes. Stories and poetry, eg. Burglar Bill. Children to tell of own experiences or make up stories.

HAIRDRESSING SALON

Resources

Gowns - old shirts. Towels.
 Empty shampoo, conditioner, washing up bottles which can be different shapes and sizes and covered.
 Gel containers.
 Shower spray.
 Broken hairdryer, hair nets.
 Assorted rollers, bobbles, grips, clips slides, ribbons.
 Mirror - cardboard covered with tin foil.
 Scissors, plastic ones or cardboard ones.
 Bowl (for a sink) cardboard taps (red and blue)
 Appointment book with name, who do you want to cut your hair? What style?
 Appointment cards.
 Price list - pictorial and written.
 Till and money (foil or play).
 Telephone (toy or old one).
 Waiting area - chair(s) with magazines.
 Hair style pictures, posters on walls - hair style magazines and books.
 Cutting area.
 Coat hangers in the waiting area.
 Sweeping brush and pan.
 Radio/cassette for background music.
 Model's head and wig or hair.
 Dolls with hair that can be washed and brushed.
 Tea and coffee equipment - plastic cups/saucers, tea, coffee containers.

Learning	
Linguistic & Literary	Magazine to read. Adverts. Making appointments. Answering the phone.
Mathematical	Prices, money, adding, subtracting. Comparative vocabulary- wet, dry, long, short, straight, curly.
Scientific	Electricity, safety, water. Detergent, shampoo - testing which is best.
Physical	Washing, drying, brushing, using play models. Putting in rollers.
Technological	Making equipment - hair dryers, wash basins etc. Designing packaging. Evaluating products.
Aesthetic & Creative	Designing posters.
Human: History/Geography	Hairstyle in the past, wigs. Hair around the world.
Social & Emotional Development	Communication, sharing, cooperating. Roles in society.
Home & School	Personal experience.
Extension Activities	Hairdresser visit class to talk about hair care.

HOSPITAL

Resources

Bed-table, mattress, blankets
 Operating table lights
 Dolls for patients
 Dressing-up clothes - hats, slippers, white coats, pyjamas
 Temperature charts, instruments, bandages, syringes, empty pill bottles, drip-bottle and tube, safety in home, safety scissors, scales
 Telephone - 999 - teaching about emergencies
 Appointment cards and medical book
 Desk for reception and secretary
 Home corner - waiting area, theatre, ward, ambulance – boxes
 Posters - immunization
 Signs - toilet, no smoking, emergency
 X-ray machine - box with picture of bones, skeleton

Learning	
Linguistic & Literary	Posters. Signs. Filling in appointment book. Answering the telephone, oral skills - talking to patients, diagnosing symptoms. Using the computer. Writing medical notes
Mathematical	Phone numbers. Weight/height. Plotting temperatures on a graph. Sorting, Classifying, Size
Scientific	X-rays. Human development. Ourselves - bodies, bones. Healthy eating. Hygiene. Medicine
Physical	Impairment. Disability. Using equipment. Making beds. Bandaging.
Technological	Designing equipment for different purposes eg. wheelchair, aids for disabilities.
Aesthetic & Creative	Uniforms. Logos
Music	
Human: History/Geography	
Spiritual & Moral	Making choices. Caring for others.
Social & Emotional Development	Sharing. Co-operating. Taking turns. Caring for others. Acting out concerns and fears.
Home & School	Safety in the home. What to do in an emergency.
Extension Activities	Careers - roles and occupations. Visits from people who help us - Doctor, Nurse, Dentist.

PET SHOP

Resources
 Pet Food
 Dishes
 Cages
 Boxes
 Straw
 Fish Tank
 Scales
 Sound effects
 Open/Close sign
 Instructions on looking after animals
 Toys
 Cash registrar
 Money
 R.S.P.C.A. Posters
 Cat/Dog basket
 Collar
 Lead
 Animal masks

Learning	
Linguistic & Literary	Instructions how to look after pets. Adverts for foods, toys equipment. Signs. Labels. Using information books. Discussion between customers and assistants.
Mathematical	Money. Change. Adding up bills, using receipts. Orders. Weighing food. Sorting into sets, ordering tins, containers on shelves. Size of animals, cages matching 1-1.
Scientific	Materials. Keeping warm/insulation/waterproofing. Suitable materials for cages. Life cycle of animals. Needs of animals. Classification of animals. Hygiene.
Physical	Grooming. Feeding. Cleaning out. Making containers.
Technological	Designing cages, toys, carrying boxes etc.
Aesthetic & Creative	Observational drawings, paintings.
Music	
Human: History/Geography	Animals from faraway places. World maps.
Spiritual & Moral	Care and protection of animals. Issues about rare species/environment.
Social & Emotional Development	Sharing. Taking on roles. Decision making. Responsibility. Care. Safety.
Home & School	Links with pets at home. Other animals eg on farms etc. zoos
Extension Activities	Visit from RSPCA. Pet's Day at School. Class pet, school pets.

THE SHOE SHOP

Resources

Shoes - display window
 Shoe boxes
 Shoe-rack for display
 Foot measuring thing/tape measures.
 Shoe horn.
 Shoe laces.
 Shoe Polish.
 Shoe cleaning area.
 Shoe repair area.
 Slippers/boots/sandals/flip flops.
 Buckles - different fasteners.
 Different textures - leather, plastic, patent, suede, fur, trainers.
 Big Shop sign.
 Cash registrar.
 Receipts
 Money.
 Shoe Bags
 Open and closed sign.
 Price tags.
 Opening times.

Learning	
Linguistic & Literary	Discussion: talking, questioning, explaining. Shop signs, reading notices, adverts. Writing receipts.
Mathematical	Shoe sizes. Sorting. Matching one to one. Pairs. Matching shoes to boxes. Measuring feet. Prices. Money.
Scientific	Materials - leather, plastic, wood. Waterproofing. Storage. .
Physical	Using equipment. Polishing shoes. Putting on shoes. Tying laces. Doing up buckles.
Technological	Designing footwear for different purposes. Window display.
Aesthetic & Creative	Observational drawing. Printing with shoes. Colour.
Human: History/Geography	Shoes in the past. Shoes around the world.
Spiritual & Moral	Festivals, special occasions.
Social & Emotional Development	Role of the customer/shoe assistant. Sharing, cooperating.

SWEET SHOP

Resources

- * Money and Till
- * Counter - table.
- * Sweets - play dough/paper mach, (paint)
- * Storage: -Cardboard boxes, Containers: - jars from sweet shops.
- * Scales - Toy and weights.
- * Paper Bags (children collect).
- * Price list.
- * Apron for shop keeper.
- * Half moon spectacles (use pipe cleaners).
- * Bell near door.
- * Sweet wrappers and chocolate wrappers.
- * Bottles of pop (not glass).
- * Freezer (box with lid - painted with poster list on side, children draw ice creams).
- * Ice lolly and choc ice wrappers, Mousse tubs etc
- * Advertisement posters.
- * Open/close sign.
- * Opening times - using clock.
- * Price tag (bright colourful stickers).
- * Shopping bags (for children to collect).
- * Baskets.
- * Litter bin - cardboard box.

Learning	
Linguistic & Literary	Lists, labels, notices. Discussion. Conversation between shop-keeper and customer.
Mathematical	Weighing coins, Counting. Sorting for colour, shape etc. Opening hours/time. Sell by dates. Graph-favourite sweets. Adding up prices. Spending money.
Scientific	Melting, tasting dissolving. Diets - teeth. Storage.
Physical	Fine motor skills.
Technological	Designing the shop - counter shelves etc. Designing posters, labels and packets. Making and designing a new sweet or bar.
Aesthetic & Creative	Posters, Packaging, Adverts, Printing.
Music	
Human: History/Geography	Then and now photos. Old adverts. Interviewing parents/grandparents about own childhood.
Spiritual & Moral	Sweets and celebrations eg Easter eggs.
Social & Emotional Development	Waiting turns, sharing, cooperation, manners, politeness.
Home & School	Visit a shop. Story "Charlie and Chocolate Factory. Health Education-sugar is bad for teeth.

TRAVEL AGENTS

Resources

Travel brochures
 Travel posters, Postcards
 Telephones
 Computer
 Pens, Till, Money
 Booking forms, Receipt books
 Tickets for travel or events
 Passport and Photographs
 Street Maps
 Timetables, Clocks, Calendars
 Globe, Maps
 Suitcases, stickers, luggage labels
 Hotels, Bed and Breakfast brochures
 Clothes for holiday (hot and cold)
 Special Equipment (skis, camera, snorkel)

Learning	
Linguistic & Literary	Reading brochures, Discussing destinations. Planning trip. Filling in forms. Giving instructions. Making lists. Writing postcards home.
Mathematical	Foreign currency. Dates, calendars, seasons. Distances to travel. Data handling - destinations. Seats on aircraft. Number of customers/rooms/beds/seats etc. Times of trains, buses etc. Weighing luggage. Favourite destinations.
Scientific	Hot and cold. Clothing for different climates. Travel.
Physical	Packing a suitcase.
Technological	Using IT to call up destinations, routes, availability of holiday. Write brochures. Describe destinations, and hotels.
Aesthetic & Creative	Designing/posters.
Music	
Human: History/Geography	Climate/weather in other countries. Choosing clothing. Other countries. Maps. Plans of cities. Local amenities.
Spiritual & Moral	Ethics of tourism/being a visitor. Change brought about by tourists. Other cultures/ religions, customs etc.
Social & Emotional Development	Sharing. Cooperation. Decision Making. Taking turns celebrating differences.
Home & School	Family holidays.
Extension Activities	Visit to a travel agents. Visitors from other countries.

